

interzone

NOVEMBER/DECEMBER 2002

NUMBER 184

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Bud Webster

Zoran Živković

Gary Westfahl

David Langford

Daniel Kaysen

Neil Williamson

Julian West



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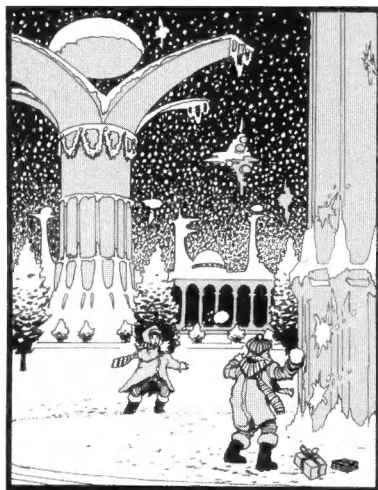
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COMING NEXT MONTH

Season's Greetings and a Happy New Year to all our readers! Next issue will bring our customary range of new stories by an interesting mix of authors, old and new – plus all our usual non-fiction features and reviews. Be sure to watch out for the January 2003 issue.



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interzone

science fiction & fantasy

NOVEMBER/DECEMBER 2002

Number 184

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Cover by Jason Hurst

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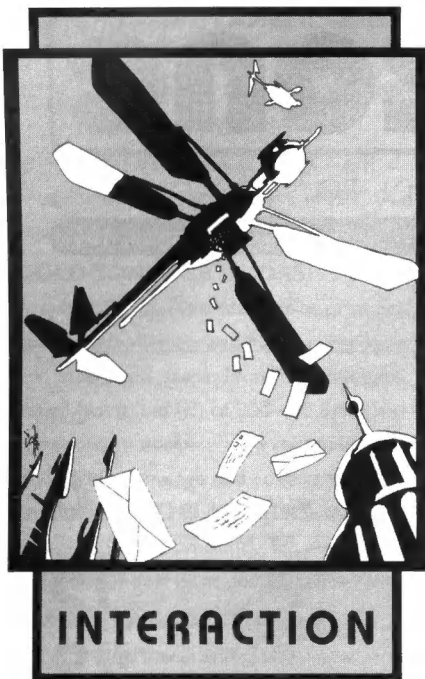
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IMPORTANT ANNOUNCEMENT

Readers will have noticed that this issue of *Interzone* is dated "November-December 2002." This does not mean that the magazine has moved to a bimonthly schedule, and nor does it mean that we have skipped an issue. The issue numbering remains continuous, and the magazine remains monthly, so no one loses out. (All subscriptions are per six or twelve issues and take no account of cover dates.) It's just that we've found it necessary, because of slippage in our schedule, to re-date the magazine so that it covers two months for this issue. We apologize for this, and hope that it causes no undue confusion. The next issue, number 185, will be the January 2003 issue.

The James White Award

The 2002 James White Award, established to honour one of Ireland's best-loved science-fiction writers, was presented on 4th November 2002 to Julian West for his short story "Vita Brevis Ars Longa." West received a cash prize and a trophy, and his winning story is published in this issue of *Interzone*.

West's story was chosen from a field of over 100 entries from all over the world. The final judging was conducted by a panel drawn from the science-fiction field in the USA and Europe: Michael Carroll, David Pringle, Orson Scott Card, Christopher Fowler and Graham Joyce.

Originally from Southampton in the UK, West now lives in Dublin with his wife and three children, where he works as a computer programmer. He says "Vita Brevis Ars Longa" was inspired by a visit to the Irish Museum of Modern Art in the Royal Hospital, Kilmainham, and in particular by a series of works by Janine Antoni. "I saw a series of busts in chocolate and soap and the artist had cast her nipples in gold. This led me ask 'how far can you go with this?'"

Commenting on the winning story, judging panel member Orson Scott Card said, "While the premise is outlandish, all the surrounding characters, attitudes, and – above all – reviews, are dead on. This omni-directional satire leaves no victims standing in the international arts scene. Yet the satire is always deft, the writing

smooth and clear, so that even if you don't 'buy' the premise, you're still swept along to the inevitable – but satisfying – end."

The award was presented at a ceremony at the Quality Inn, Walsall, immediately following the Novacon 32 Science Fiction Convention. Novacons are held annually in the Birmingham area and James White was a guest of honour at the very first one in 1970 and at Novacon 15. White's granddaughter Sinead Larkin presented the award. Speaking at the ceremony, Ian McDonald, Guest of Honour at Novacon 32, spoke of how White had influenced him. "He continues to have this positive influence on new writers through this award."

James White was Ireland's best-known sf writer. His first published story, "Assisted Passage," appeared in *New Worlds* in 1953. Before that, however, he was known for his work on the fanzines *Slant* and *Hyphen*. His novels include *All Judgment Fled*, *The Watch Below* and *The Silent Stars Go By*. However he is best remembered for his series of stories and novels set on the giant space hospital Sector General. He died in August 1999.

Details of the 2003 award, open to all previously unpublished writers, will be announced early in the New Year.

– James Bacon, Award Administrator, Dublin

For further information visit www.jameswhiteaward.com or e-mail: info@jameswhiteaward.com

Julian West centre, winner of the 2002 James White Award, receives the trophy from Sinead Larkin left, granddaughter of James White, and Ian McDonald right, Guest of Honour at Novacon 32.



Challenging Views

Dear Editors:

My thanks to Evelyn Lewes for her article "All Good All the Time" in *IZ* 182. I have read various attacks on Ms Lewes's pieces within previous *Interzones*, and I feared the worst upon starting this one, with her lazy school-yard comments about the shows she doesn't like and her pretentious listing of what she was looking for in MVC. However, I stuck with article and actually found it to be an intelligent, insightful analysis of Sci-Fi on TV. Now if only she could lose the snide attempts at sarcasm, her articles would hang together a lot better. We have no need of more than one Julie Burchill.

As to the fiction in *IZ* 182, Christopher Evans's piece was interesting, but I felt that the ending was rather rushed and didn't quite fit. Pity, as the rest was very good. Mat Coward's piece seemed to benefit from neither a good idea nor a good ending. Just seemed a quick and casual piece based on someone's personal reaction to management training. However, it could make a good film script – has Mat considered that? Claude Lalumière's "A Place Where Nothing Ever Happens" – well structured, good pace and good idea; yet not sure what the point of the sex scenes were, and they didn't seem to actually move the plot along. However, the stories by Zoran Zivkovic and Maya Kaathryn Bohnhoff were both excellent. 'Nuff said. So, overall, an interesting range of fiction, styles and ideas – what more can one ask for? Thanks.

Richard Boulter

Exeter, Devon

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Bohnhoff Story

Dear Editors:

If Maya Kaathryn Bohnhoff had submitted her story, "Cruel and Unusual Punishment" (*Interzone* 182) to her usual American market of *Analog*, it almost certainly would have been rejected. This is because it bears a number of striking similarities to the story "In Spirit" by Pat Forde, which appeared in the September 2002 issue of that magazine.

In Pat Forde's story an incarcerated terrorist involved in the 9/11 atrocities agrees to undergo an unusual procedure which confronts him with the enormity of what he has done and drives him ultimately to seek forgiveness.

It is clear that the Forde story was deliberately chosen for the September issue of *Analog*. Did you make a conscious choice to include the Bohnhoff story in the September issue of *IZ*? If so, it is a remarkable coincidence.

Stephen Tollyfield

stephen.tollyfield@talk21.com

Editor: *I'm sure the resemblances you find are purely coincidental – sparked, no doubt, by ideas which are in the air at the moment. The two stories appeared almost simultaneously, on different sides of the Atlantic.*

More on Evelyn Lewes

Dear Editors:

I do try not to respond to Evelyn Lewes's taunts, but it really is getting too much. We have established by now that there are certain TV programmes Ms Lewes does not care for. What is gained by continuing to be gratuitously rude about them? Her puerile (and I mean that) renamings – "Babylon Tripe," "Fartscape" – merely reduce the intellectual level to that of Bart Simpson. And unnecessarily antagonize those readers who do not agree with her opinion.

That she goes on to make some interesting points is then lost. Mind you, as I don't have satellite/cable/digital, much of what she's talking about is lost on me. I have at least one more series to go before *Buffy* comes "to a triumphal conclusion" and I'm still enjoying the first seasons of *Dark Angel* and *Enterprise*.

As far as I'm concerned, Ms Lewes's column has become a complete waste of space.

Paul Evans

paul@pevans.co.uk

<http://www.pevans.co.uk>

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"We're All in This Alone"

Philip Lawson

(Michael Bishop & Paul Di Filippo)

Bam! The morning newspaper hit the screen. Harry Lingenfelter sloshed coffee onto the mess littering his tabletop: two weeks' worth of prior editions of *The Atlanta Harbinger*, all creased open to the same damned page; stacks of unpaid bills and scary envelopes from his wife's lawyers; dishes crusted with the remnants of sour microwave bachelor meals. Lingenfelter gulped a calming breath and raked the stubble on his jaw with well-bitten fingernails.

Blast old Ernie! Couldn't he – for once – plop the paper gently on the grass? Every morning, Ernie Salter nailed the screen door. And every morning since the acrimonious departure of his wife Nan, Lingenfelter *jumped*. Nan's decamping to her sister's house in Montana, almost a continent away, had not surprised him, but it rankled yet. His gut never stopped roiling. In fact, nowadays even the trill of a house finch could unnerve him.

But what most rankled, even shamed, Lingenfelter was his intolerably foolish preoccupation with a feature in the *Harbinger* called "The Squawk Box." How much longer could he indulge his crazy, self-generated obsession with a few column inches in a two-bit newspaper? "The Squawk Box" ruled his waking life. Sometimes it

invaded his dreams. Work on his latest Ethan Dedicos mystery novel had almost stalled, even as his deadline neared, and one look at the kitchen – hell, at any room in the house – disclosed the humiliating magnitude of his bedevilment.

"The Squawk Box" ran daily in the *Harbinger*. It resembled similar columns in newspapers across the nation. A friend in Illinois had forwarded Lingenfelter copies of a feature called "The Fret Net," and at airport newsstands he had run across others titled "The Gripe Vine" and "The Complaint Department." An outlet for pithy *bon mots* and rants, these columns consisted of anonymous submissions from the paper's own readers. The *Harbinger's* readers generally squawked via telephone or e-mail. An unnamed staff member, self-dubbed the "Squawk Jock," winnowed these quips and printed the wittiest. Although the Squawk Jock never interjected private opinion, Lingenfelter had concluded from the evidence of the columns that he had right-of-centre leanings and no taste for controversy. You rarely encountered a squawk about abortion, gun control, ethnicity, the death penalty, or religion.

The clumsy phrasings, the naïveté, and the smugness

of the resulting mix usually irked Lingenfelter, but he could not stop reading it. Like the trend of “reality television,” the window that “The Squawk Box” opened onto the citizenry’s collective soul afforded a glimpse of a purgatory where sinners freely uttered their uncensored thoughts, however self-serving or -damning.

Lingenfelter had begun reading the column in earnest only after Nan’s departure. To that point, he had only scanned its entries or, on Sunday mornings, jumped to the highlighted “Squawk of the Week.” But just two days of involuntary solitude had forced him into new patterns of time wasting, and five days of reading the feature from top to bottom had addicted him.

Most squawks clearly originated with their submitters. Unhappily, some readers plagiarized their submissions, rephrasing ancient jokes, ripping off cartoon captions or the punch lines of magazine anecdotes. Often, the Squawk Jock printed the cloned lines along with the authentic ones, without distinction. (Undoubtedly, the pressure to fill space explained the Jock’s lack of discrimination.) Still, by and large, the kudos and complaints making up each column exhibited the vivid eccentricities of those who had composed them.

- * *Ever notice how the faces of drivers in an Atlanta traffic jam look just like the mugs of “clients” at the cheapest mortuary in town?*
- * *Our new President has problems above the neck rather than below the waist.*
- * *A fool and his money are soon dot-com investors.*
- * *I’m so broke that if it cost a quarter to go around the world, I couldn’t get from the Fox Theatre to the High Museum.*
- * *The latest census shows a lot fewer married couples. Folks have finally figured out that they can fight without a licence.*

This last squawk had made Lingenfelter wince.

But his fascination with these outpourings of the community mind had soon morphed into something unexpected and embarrassing, namely, a desire to *join* the voluble herd. He wanted to compose a squawk so succinct and biting that the Squawk Jock not only featured it in one of the paper’s daily columns but also showcased it on Sunday morning as “Squawk of the Week.”

Having set this goal, Lingenfelter felt sure of success. After all, he had some small cachet as a writer. Three modestly selling mysteries starring his gutsy private dick Ethan Dedicos (with a fourth in progress – *slowly* in progress, true, but certain to appear to good reviews eventually) all testified to his skill and success. Or so he and his agent almost daily reassured each other.

From this position of superiority, Lingenfelter had written and e-mailed off a half dozen brilliant squawks, then sat back to await the appearance – the next day – of three or four of them. After all, who could more intelli-

gently tap the *Zeitgeist*? Who could more eloquently encapsulate the furore and the folly of these portentous days at the beginning of a new millennium?

But neither the next day’s *Harbinger* nor any of that week’s succeeding issues had featured his work!

Doggedly, Lingenfelter repeated the process – with identical results. Subsequent barrages of squawks – all of which he polished to a high gloss using time that he should have spent advancing Ethan Dedicos in his investigations – likewise met with rejection. Clearly, the Squawk Jock found no merit in his work. Given the crap that did make the column, the Squawk Jock may have even *hated* Lingenfelter’s fastidiously crafted quips.

As of today, with neither money nor publicity as likely trophies, he had wasted three *weeks* in this pursuit. What foolishness! No, what quixotic *idiocy*! But he could not stop. He had to make that jerk – that bitch – that Grub Street hack, male or female – acknowledge the beauty and power of his vision, and feature one of his killer witticisms in “The Squawk Box”!

Opening today’s paper, Lingenfelter could already feel his pulse throbbing. What bloated japes and mindless yawps had crowded out the twelve gems that he had zapped to the *Harbinger*’s virtual mailbox yesterday? Hope flickered in him, but dimly. Either to forestall disappointment or to fuel himself for another round of squawking, he scrutinized the front page, then studied the traffic reports, obituaries, and crime accounts in the Metro section.

A small headline on an interior Metro page caught his eye: “Airline Employee at Hartsfield / Victim of Gruesome Murder.” The details of this slaying would have given even the hard-boiled Ethan Dedicos pause. A check-in clerk for Southwest Airlines had been found in an elevator in the North Terminal with the top of his skull cut away and his brain primitively extracted. As bloody embellishment, the killer had chopped off the ill-fated clerk’s right hand.

Lingenfelter mumbled, “Jesus,” as he peeled back the pages of the Diversions section to “The Squawk Box.” Then he stopped and stared at the ceiling. The bizarre particulars of the airport murder plucked at his memory. He set today’s paper aside and rummaged about for last Sunday’s. In it, he found the “Squawk of the Week,” which struck him as insupportably petulant: “Asking the brainless counter help at Hartsfield International for a hand is a waste of time. A prison inmate might as well ask a guard for a massage.” An eel of discomfiting coldness wriggled down Lingenfelter’s spine. His nape hair bristled.

Grisly coincidence? Surely. Anyway, this squawk had no more wit or grace than a dozen others that had appeared last week. The Squawk Jock had spotlighted it only to plug a recent investigative series in the *Harbinger* on the breakdown of services at the airport and attendant customer frustration. Lingenfelter sighed heavily. Some of his own experiences at Hartsfield had nearly moved *him* to murder, although not to a murder as complex or gory as this one.

He laid the old Sunday paper aside and returned to

today's edition. Fumblingly, he checked out "The Squawk Box," confirming his suspicion that its editor had stiffed him again. As always, it consisted of the banal, tongue-tied, and pilfered submissions of dolts and plagiarists. Two-thirds of these troglodytes, Lingenfelter smirked, had to be the Squawk Jock's creditors. Or inbred cousins.

Thirty minutes later, he refilled his coffee cup and slunk into his study. At his computer, he ignored the guilt-provoking icons symbolizing his stalled novel and clicked instead on his Internet connection. The Squawk Jock's ignorance and pettiness had to have a natural limit. A fresh baker's dozen of his canniest topical epigrams would sound that limit and result in his first published squawk. One of his efforts might even earn enthronement as "Squawk of the Week"! Gamely, Lingenfelter curled his fingers above his keyboard.

- * *Confession is good for the soul, not to mention the prosecution.*
- * *Marriage institutionalizes love, sex, parenting, and, sometimes, one or both partners.*
- * *My four-year-old niece has a toy pool table. She shoots peas into its pockets with a plastic straw. The kid really knows her peas and cues.*
- * *Caller ID is a fine innovation. Now we need another, Callee ID, for those of us who forget whom we're calling.*
- * *Pity my estranged wife, a designer-clothes exclusivist. She was confined to our home last winter by a swollen dresser drawer.*
- * *If my mood depended on the regular publication of my squawks, I'd need a truckload of Zolofit just to elevate my feet.*

Lingenfelter savoured these recent submissions, as if they belonged in *Bartlett's Quotations*. But Sunday had come again, and the Squawk Jock had nixed them all. Despite both the day and the early hour, Lingenfelter knocked back a jolt of Wild Turkey, neat. Granted, he had stolen that barb about Nan's fussy taste in clothes from Hoosier humorist, Kin Hubbard (1868-1930), but the others had all originated with him alone. How could anybody bypass them in favour of crap like – well, like the crap the Squawk Jock preferred?

The "Squawk of the Week," for example, struck Lingenfelter as a whimper of no distinction at all: "The fat of our great land has rendered us into a nation of grasping fatties." It barely warranted a place in the column, much less in a box at the feature's top. Lingenfelter poured another shot and tossed it down. Let the dork responsible for that fatuous line relish his brief moment of glory. Alcoholism and altruism alike delude, Lingenfelter thought. A moment later, he twigged to the fact that his words had... yes, squawk potential:

Alcoholism and altruism alike delude.

He wobbled off to catapult this saying through the ether and to compose another batch of epigrams for his nemesis. When his phone rang in the midst of this activity, Lingenfelter ignored it on the grounds that his agent – thank God for Caller ID – would scold him rather than root him on.

During the following week, Lingenfelter took to meeting his deliveryman, Ernie Salter, at kerbside at 6:25 a.m. and seizing the *Harbinger* right out of his hand. Monday morning witnessed the first of these addled rendezvous.

A heavyset African-American with muttonchop whiskers and a foul cigarillo, Salter hunched forward in his spavined pickup truck and cocked a scarred eyebrow at Lingenfelter. The two had already talked about Lingenfelter's "Squawk Box" hang-up, and Salter obviously thought him tetchy. Dashboard glow shadowed his bulldog jowls and the chest of his faded Olympics tee shirt.

"No luck last week, eh?"

"Maybe this morning." Lingenfelter paged immediately to "The Squawk Box." Several blocks away – the two men lived in Mountboro, 80 miles southwest of Atlanta – a rooster crowed. As the sky to the east pinked up prettily, Lingenfelter tilted his paper into its sheen. His brow furrowed. Then he refolded the section and thwacked it against the pickup, hard.

"A moron chooses these things! A spiteful, dyslexic moron!"

Ernie asked, "How much does the *Harbinger* pay for a squawk, Harry?"

"Not a copper cent. You know that."

"Yeah, I know that. Do you get your name in the paper?"

"Every squawk is printed anonymously. You know that, too."

"No wonder you're losing Zs trying to crash this market," Ernie said. "The big bucks. The fame."

"Damn it, Ernie. I can get sarcasm from my agent. Or from Nan, long-distance."

Ernie's cigarillo waltzed over to his other lip corner. "Get back to your Ethan Dedicos stories, Harry. I really dig that guy."

"You and 14 other people."

"I got to go. Stop squawking. Start writing again."

Ernie let out the clutch, and his clattery old pickup began to roll.

Lingenfelter trotted along behind it. "I'll see print yet!" he cried. "I'll make that jerk sit up and take notice!"

"Don't write so damned highfalutin!" Ernie shouted back. "The Squawk Jock *hates* highfalutin!" Apparently, Ernie's patience had just run out. Lingenfelter jogged to a bemused standstill.

But he showed up hopefully at kerbside every morning, anyway – to no purpose but the further exasperation of Ernie Salter, who on Friday exited his truck, hooked elbows with Lingenfelter, and walked him back inside. "They aint nothing in here from you, Harry. Nothing." He shoved Lingenfelter into a kitchen chair and poured him a cup of his own godawful molasses-like coffee. "I'd lay odds. Check it out."

Lingenfelter checked. Ernie was right. Another strike-

out. No, a whole *clutch* of mortifying whiffs!

With a tenderness that reduced Lingenfelter to tears, Ernie gripped his shoulders and squeezed. The massage lasted not quite a minute. Then Ernie said, "Let the damned bug in your bonnet go, Harry," and slowly clomped out.

Lingenfelter picked up the *Harbinger*. On the front page of the Metro section, this: "Bank President Found Mutilated / In Abandoned Car Dealership." The headline alone yanked him erect. The story itself shoved a flaming rod down his spine. His hands shook, and the newspaper's pages rattled as if burning.

A night watchman had found the bank president's decapitated head sitting on the hood of his new Ford Exorbitant in the roofless courtyard of a car dealership that had just gone bankrupt. The dealer had sold economical imports from Eastern Europe. The watchman found the overweight victim's body hanging in the boarded-up showroom like the carcass of a butchered hog. The air conditioning, which should not have worked at all, blasted away at its highest setting. Meanwhile, an iron kettle next to the SUV boiled merrily over a fire of scrap wood, rendering the man's internal organs into soap scum and tallow. A pair of severed hands gripped the Exorbitant's steering wheel, like claws. The whole ghastly scene suggested that the culprit had fled only moments before the arrival of the watchman.

Lingenfelter picked up last Sunday's paper again. Shaking like a man with delirium tremens, he tore from it the "Squawk of the Week." He then cut out the story about the bank bigwig's murder/mutilation, stapled the squawk to its corner, and stuffed both items into an envelope, which he addressed to the Atlanta police department. By now, some law-enforcement official *must* have noticed the connection between the *Harbinger's* featured squawk and the particulars of the killings at both the airport and the car dealership. How many earlier featured squawks had provided a sick human specimen the impetus for murder? How many prize squawks of the future would prod that same wacko to slay again?

Don't mail this in, Lingenfelter told himself. Phone it in. You can't waste time – oh, the irony of *that* self-admonition – going through the U.S. Postal Service. You need to speak to somebody *now*! Although he didn't really want to get involved – a cliché with a shame-engendering edge – he steeled himself to call. Even as he touched the numbers on his keypad, though, he wondered if the police would suspect *him*. Tipsters sometimes turned out to be perps, and even if the police congratulated him on his civic-mindedness, they would file his name and number for future reference.

A polite female functionary took his call, promised to pass along his tip, and admitted that several other people had already telephoned with the same concern. In fact, the policewoman said, detectives had noted not only the squawk-as-murder-incitement angle but also the head-and-hands obsession of the killer or killers responsible for these latest mutilation slayings.

"Latest?" Lingenfelter said. "Others have occurred?"

"Thanks for doing your duty as a citizen," the woman

replied. "We'll call if we have any further questions." *Click.*

Lingenfelter set the envelope with its provocative clip-pings aside and re-examined the squawks in today's paper. His heart, whose pounding had eased a bit, began to hammer again at his ribcage. One item annoyed him intensely: "Now that 'The Squawk Box' has printed me, I have an agent ready to sell movie rights to my life to the highest bidder." What an egomaniac! What a self-deluding boob!

Oddly, Lingenfelter's own agent, Morris Vosbury, chose that moment to call him again. He let the phone ring. Just as his answering machine prepared to kick in – provoking Morris's departure, for he refused to talk to a machine – Lingenfelter relented and picked up.

"Finally," Morris said. "How goes the latest Ethan Dedicos? You gonna make your April 15th deadline?"

"Tax day?" Lingenfelter moaned. "That's less than a month off."

"Yeah, well, we chose it as a mnemonic aid, Harry. Remember how you forgot your own birthday as a deadline for the last Dedicos?"

"That book drained me spiritually," Lingenfelter said. "I had to go deep – deep into myself – for *Blessed Are the Debonair*."

Morris's long pause suggested that he was biting his tongue. Eventually he said, "So how goes *Seven Terriers from Bedlam*?"

"Not bad until you broke my concentration." After a few closing pleasantries, Lingenfelter hung up. A pox on Morris, anyway. How, after such an intrusion, could he hope to concentrate on his fiction writing? Better to soothe his nerves with a little Wild Turkey and a new strategy for cracking "The Squawk Box."

** Some self-obsessed fame seekers think that enlightenment occurs at the pop of a flashbulb.*

** Cell phones have as much business in the front seat of moving motor vehicles as uncapped whisky bottles.*

** Ever notice how the mayor's moustache makes him look like Adolf Hitler in an elongating funhouse mirror?*

** My condolences to the person who spent two weeks in Los Angeles for brain surgery. Even without surgery, L.A. can appallingly alter the brain.*

** In the long annals of crime, Fulton County's counterfeiter of Beanie Babies hardly qualifies as an Al Capone clone.*

** Yesterday I got a mailing from an "intellectual" magazine begging me to subscribe: "Think for yourself. Just send in our card." I thought for myself. I ash-canned the card.*

One more, Lingenfelter thought, just one more, and I'll get back to my novel. He tapped out: "Journalism is to lit-

erature as a stomach flutter is to all-out panic." What did that mean, exactly? He had no clear idea. He did know that he had killed yet another afternoon, and when none of these submissions appeared in the paper that week, he knew, too, that his career was down spiralling like a missile-struck F-111.

How did other writers maintain their focus when day-to-day living threw so many distractions at them? He checked the Activities page in the *Harbinger*. Conferences and book signings were rampant in Atlanta this weekend, with visits from such eminences as John Updike and A. S. Byatt, such mystery-writing stalwarts as Sue Grafton and Joe R. Lansdale, and such up-and-comers as Ace Atkins and Atlanta's own Chick Morrow. Lingenfelter had met Chick last year at a Georgia Author of the Year programme. Although he had liked Chick, he had also felt a twinge of impending competition. This Saturday the younger writer had a signing, albeit a modest one, at the Science Fiction & Mystery Bookshop on Highland Avenue.

Chick bore down and wrote. He deserved his success. Lingenfelter could not imagine him sweating manuscript staples to place a silly one- or two-liner in an amateur forum like "The Squawk Box." This thought sobered Lingenfelter, literally. He set aside his bourbon bottle and applied himself all morning to *Seven Terriers from Bedlam*, his first long stint of work on the novel in over six weeks. At noon, he felt like a hero – or, at least, a competent human being.

On Sunday, he paged to the squawks out of habit rather than compulsion. The "Squawk of the Week" leapt out like a mocking jack-in-the-box, but he thought it amusing – and incisive – and wished that he *had* written it, for it gibed with his own experience:

"Having met several authors at book signings, I can report that most writers are smarter on paper than in person."

Amen.

Hold on, Lingenfelter warned himself. If the "Squawk of the Week" provides our anonymous serial killer fantasy fodder for his next murder, why couldn't he settle on *you* as his next victim? Ridiculous. For one thing, the previous murders both took place in or around Atlanta, not out in the country. For another, even in the South, writers abound. If you know where to look, writers wriggle like maggots.

Lingenfelter observed the Sabbath. He walked to Ernie Salter's and played him several games of two-handed poker. And the next week he wrote – on his novel, not on a battery of desperate doomed-to-rejection squawks. Life seemed almost tolerable again. One night, in fact, he called Nan in Montana – hey, not a bad title for a Western – and apologized for his crazy work schedule and net surfing, which together had pitched their relationship into the crapper.

On Thursday morning, though, he opened the *Harbinger* to find this headline on the front page: "Rising Atlanta Mystery Star Chick Morrow / Himself the Subject of a Mystery: / Body Found Strangled in Ponce de Leon Apartment." An inset head read, "Police suspect

that killer / uses popular *Harbinger* column / to target victims." Jesus, Lingenfelter thought.

Apparently, the murderer had surprised Chick Morrow at his desk and choked the life out of him. Then the fun began. The intruder affixed a dunce cap to Chick's head, rolled out a sheet of butcher paper, and laid Chick on the paper. Then he sketched a red outline around Chick's body with a grease pencil, just as the police draw a chalk outline around a murder victim for investigative purposes. This time the killer had not mutilated or dismembered his victim. But when the police moved Chick's body, they found the paper inside his outline teeming with mathematical formulae, some so abstruse that only Steven Hawking could have deciphered them.

"Think last Sunday's 'Squawk of the Week,'" said one detective. "You know, '*Smarter on paper than in person.*' Get it? Pretty highbrow. Pretty sick."

I'd say, Lingenfelter murmured.

Bam! Bam! The screen on the kitchen door banged open and shut.

Lingenfelter jumped up from his computer table. Had the killer come for him, too? He kept no handgun in his house, and this morning he regretted that scruple. In a panic he looked about for a heavy object – doorstop, paperweight, or dictionary – to use for self-defence.

Ernie Salter manifested in the doorway. "Hey, Harry, how you doin'?"

"Not so good." Lingenfelter patted his heart. "A friend of mine up in Atlanta was strangled dead yesterday."

"That's why I come over. That damned 'Squawk Box' thing. You hear how the paper aint gonna run a 'Squawk of the Week' no more?"

"I just read it – last paragraph in the story."

"Oh man," Ernie said. "Sorry bout your friend. Weird how it's got this screwy squawk tie-in. Weird n spooky."

"Take me to Atlanta. I've got to see about Chick, help the family, something. I'll pay if you drive me." Nan had taken their car when she skedaddled for Montana, but Lingenfelter had not missed it until now. He got around Mountboro just fine on foot or bicycle.

"You got it, bro. When you want to leave?"

An hour later, Ernie drove Lingenfelter up I-85 toward Atlanta. Traffic streamed about them, and by chance they fell in behind a slow-moving Parmenter's chicken truck. White fluff from its stacked cages blew back at them in a diffuse blizzard, along with a sickening stench.

Ernie said, "Now those birds got something *real* to squawk about."

"You mean Chick Morrow's murder doesn't qualify?"

"I mean I'm glad you gettin over your squawk hang-up. Even as I'm sorry bout poor Chick."

"I'm just jumpy, Ernie. Chick's murder has really hit me. The other killings made me feel weird, but this one wrings my heart. There's more to all this than a robotic 'Son of Sam' character taking random instructions from a newspaper. The Squawk Box strikes me as – well, flat-out *evil*. Look at the hold the damn thing had on me. It's like all my aborted squawks fed something bad, a monster living off ill-will."

Ernie chewed his unlit cigar. "You trying to say the Squawk Jock's the killer?"

"No. Well, maybe. Damn, I don't know! The cops probably grilled the Jock, once they saw the link between the column and the murders, but he's still running free. I don't know *what* to think."

"Best not to think at all then." Ernie dialled in some gospel music and hummed along with it.

Traffic in the metro region had worsened nearly every month for the past decade. Today it crawled. Unable to pass the smelly chicken truck, they suffered with rolled-up windows and no air conditioning in the moderate late-March heat.

Chick Morrow's well-maintained apartment building rested between an electrical supply store and a laundry-processing plant – hardly the most elite neighbourhood. But Lingenfelter knew just how little beginning writers usually earned, and he admired Chick for doing as well as he had. The place had a low redbrick wall in front of it and majestic oaks rearing in back. Lingenfelter stepped onto the sidewalk.

"Coming with?"

"I aint no Hardy Boy. Got a sister on the South Side who wants to see me."

"Okay. I have some other places to visit here, anyway. But I can get to em using the bus. See you later."

Ernie scribbled on a matchbook. "Here's my sister's number. Call me when you're ready to head on home." His pickup grumbled off down the street.

Lingenfelter climbed the condo steps. The name *Chick Morrow* on an embossed strip identified the apartment. He mashed the button.

A woman's dispirited voice issued from the speaker grille: "Yes? Who is it?"

"I'm a friend of Chick's. Harry Lingenfelter. I just – well, I just wanted to talk to someone about Chick."

"Come on up."

The door to Chick's apartment opened on the blotchy face of a red-haired young woman, who introduced herself as Lorna Riley. She surprised Lingenfelter by observing that Chick had often talked about him.

"Don't worry about defacing the 'crime scene,'" she said, waving him in. "Once the police had finished, they put me in touch with a company that specializes in cleaning up murder scenes. Can you imagine making your living that way? I never did, before all this. Now, such a service seems a gruesome inevitability."

Inside the modest apartment, Lingenfelter had no idea how to proceed, or what he hoped to learn, or how he could help. He asked impulsive questions. Did Chick have any enemies that Lorna knew about? No. Was Chick despondent? No, Lorna rejoined. His first novel was about to receive a favourable review in this Sunday's *Harbinger*, and his agent had already fielded a half dozen inquiries from Hollywood. He had everything to live for.

Lingenfelter disengaged from his role as inquisitor. He had to go. He extended his hand to Lorna, who flabbergasted him by falling into his arms, her whole body slack with despair. She wept quietly as Lingenfelter patted her back. Eventually, she regained her composure, apologized

for the lapse, and told him that the funeral would take place on Sunday in a church near Emory University.

"Will you come?"

"Of course." He gave her both his phone number and that of Ernie's sister, then tripped down the stairs and strolled to the nearest bus stop.

Like many freelancers, Lingenfelter often took quick assignments for the ready cash. Among these jobs, he most enjoyed writing book reviews for the *Harbinger*. His editor was Heather Farris, a woman from Rhode Island with a degree in comparative lit from Brown University. He had never met her in person, but on the telephone she had a scrappy personality and a sharp-tongued sense of humour. Surely, she could introduce him to the Squawk Jock. Once he detailed his own minor complicity in feeding the beast loose in Atlanta, she *had* to help him, journalistic ethics be damned.

Suppose Heather did introduce him to the Jock – what then? Did he confront the man as an accomplice to the murders? Ask him if he knew the identities of any likely serial killers? Badger him about his failure to print any of Lingenfelter's own squawks? And if he learned something that pointed to the killer, did he call the police? Or did he put on the persona of his own Ethan Dedicos just as Bruce Wayne put on the regalia of Batman? What role *should* he play?

A block from the newspaper building, Lingenfelter got off the bus and walked to its towering façade. At the security desk in the lobby, he explained that he had come to see Heather Farris, the Book Page editor. The guard spoke briefly into a headset mike and nodded him to a bank of elevators with copper-coloured doors. Riding an elevator up, Lingenfelter felt like a surreal avatar of himself.

Heather greeted him warmly. She had a mole on her left jaw on which he fixated. At some moments the olive-complexioned editor glowed like a movie star, at others she went as sallow as a jaundice sufferer – shifts that discomfited Lingenfelter as he tried to explain why he had come and what he wanted. Her mole had him hypnotized. His mission had him stuttering.

Finally, Heather broke in: "Our so-called Squawk Jock doesn't meet folks face to face. He wants to avoid bribery, intimidation, even outright threats on his life. Some people will try almost anything to get a squawk of theirs in print."

"I believe it," Lingenfelter said. "But Chick's strangulation – this whole series of murders – should alter things radically."

"It has. We've dropped the 'Squawk of the Week.' And the police already know the Jock's identity. *Your* need to know, however, seems low-level, if not nonexistent."

Lingenfelter said that he had deduced the link between the "Squawk of the Week" and the murders early on, that Chick Morrow was a friend, and that he had a powerful sense that "The Squawk Box" channelled a current of amorphous evil in the city. The Squawk Jock's weekly selection of a champion squawk focused this evil and put it into deadly real-world play. He, Lingenfelter, under-

stood the mind of the typical squawker as well as, if not better than, anyone. Moreover, for the entire city's sake, Heather had an *obligation* to tell him the Squawk Jock's identity.

"My God, Harry, you really *do* believe you're Ethan Dedicos. What can you do that the police can't?"

"Something – something more than they've managed. Tell me, Heather."

"He'd kill me." Heather locked her fingers and extended both hands in a tension-reducing stretch. "Oh, not literally of course."

"I'll say a friend on the police force tipped me. He'll never suspect you."

Review copies of books – bound galleys, photocopied typescripts, finished hardcovers – teetered on Heather's desk in misarranged stacks. She drummed her fingers on the dust jacket of an illustrated art book titled *Topographical Abstracts of the Human Body*. She squinted at Lingenfelter. She exhaled and said, "Sylvester Jowell."

"The *Harbinger's* art critic?" This revelation was so unexpected that Lingenfelter thought it bogus, an obvious dodge. "You're kidding."

"Go see him. Check the far end of this floor." Heather gestured, accidentally toppling a stack of books. "The next time you visit, don't ask me to play stool pigeon."

Lingenfelter nodded goodbye and wandered among the reporters' workstations toward Sylvester Jowell's office, fearful that as soon as he had stepped out of earshot, Heather would telephone the police to confess what she had just done.

Sylvester Jowell! Lingenfelter marvelled. The man wrote hoity-toity reviews of art gallery openings, single-artist retrospectives, etc. He had two Harvard degrees, a Pulitzer Prize for art criticism, and a citywide reputation as an erudite snob. Had he really agreed to take on the proletarian task of editing "The Squawk Box"? Did his duties as art critic give him so much leisure – and so little leftover discrimination – that he gladly compiled that daily burlesque of good taste? Maybe his well-known fondness for outsider art had a literary counterpart. Atlanta's squawks probably charmed him in the same way as did the childlike visual artefacts of Grandma Moses and Howard Finster.

Jowell's cubicle stood empty. A reporter dressed in satiny grey, including even his tie, intercepted Lingenfelter. The illustrious Mr Jowell, this reporter said, had taken himself for the umpteenth time to the High Museum for yet another encounter with a special exhibition of the horrific paintings of the late British artist Francis Bacon. If Lingenfelter hurried over there, he could find Mr Jowell in the galleries devoted to this prestigious show.

As Lingenfelter turned to go, the reporter asked, "Do you like Bacon?"

"Usually only on a BLT."

The High Museum suggested a modernistic castle-keep made of big bone-white Lego blocks. The long-running Francis Bacon exhibit had not attracted families or young children – a parental outcry had put an end to one sched-

uled middle-school field trip – and its most devout fans had already seen it many times. So Lingenfelter had no trouble getting in – for ten dollars – or striding up the access ramp to the maze of rooms filled with Bacon's unsettling images.

Lingenfelter declined a headset providing commentary on each of the paintings. He peered about in foreign-feeling awe. The hardwood floors seemed to rise under him like concrete slabs on hidden hydraulic lifts, and the pictures, many under glass, assaulted him with bloody reds and opalescent greys. Moving slowly, he gaped at Bacon's huge renderings of screaming popes, butchered cow carcasses, feral dogs, and distorted three-part crucifixions. The show bemused and sickened Lingenfelter, who sidled into a small room with only a water cooler and a wicker bench for furnishings. He sat on the bench, his head hanging forward.

"Too much for you, eh?"

Lingenfelter raised his head. Sylvester Jowell – recognizable from the photo that accompanied his art columns – stared at Lingenfelter without pity or even much interest. He modelled a burgundy jersey with its sleeves pushed up and thrust his hands deep in the pockets of pleated grey trousers.

"I've never seen such ugly work on canvas before."

"Didn't you read my eloquent warnings in the *Harbinger*? I've written about this show like no other."

Lingenfelter's nape hair bristled. "I know who you are," he said. "In addition to the *Harbinger's* art critic, I mean."

"Then you have the advantage of me."

"You're the Squawk Jock."

Sylvester Jowell winced. "I loathe that sobriquet. I loathe the feature's *title*, for that matter. I lobbied for 'Cavils and Kvetches,' you know."

"I had no idea. A friend said the Squawk Jock hated highfalutin stuff, but 'Cavils and Kvetches' sounds pretentious as hell."

Jowell crossed his arms. "Perhaps I *do* know who you are."

Lingenfelter repressed an urge to scream. "Who?"

"The psychopath using my 'Squawk's of the Week' as templates for outrageously nasty murders."

This accusation stunned Lingenfelter. He wanted to shout it down – to jump up, wrap his fingers around Jowell's neck, and squeeze until, flushing scarlet and wheezing, Jowell recanted the insult. Of course, those very actions would fulfil Jowell's every vile expectation of him. As Lingenfelter shook with rage and self-disgust, Jowell took two or three steps back, his body limned against the folds of the pearl-hued drapes cloaking the opposite wall. He glimmered before these drapes like an object in a cheap special-effects shot of a matter-transmission field.

"Don't abandon me here," Lingenfelter said. "You know I'm not the killer."

"How do I know that?"

"Because you're either doing the killings yourself or artfully directing them."

"Ah." Jowell smiled. "Rest assured that I have no intention of abandoning you here, Mr Lingenfelter."

His image – as shiny as a tinfoil cutout – steadied

before the headache-inducing dazzle of the curtain.

At that moment, three figures – like three-dimensional projections of the images in some of Francis Bacon's paintings – walked through the chamber in single file. The first was an airline clerk wearing a bloody cap and a bloody bandage over the stub at the end of his right arm. The second was a portly man in a chalk-striped Italian business suit carrying his own swollen, shocked-looking head in his handless arms. These grotesque persons passed through the chamber without speaking. The third figure – a fit-looking priest in a black cassock and a jaunty black biretta – halted directly in front of Sylvester Jowell. He turned to look at Lingenfelter, who prepared to avert his gaze.

"Excuse me," the interloper said in an odd nasal voice. "Do you know in which room I can find *Study after Velazquez, Number One*?"

Lingenfelter experienced profound relief that the shade of Chick Morrow, bearing the signs of his strangulation, had not posed this question. "No, sir, I'm afraid I don't," he said belatedly.

The priest consulted a photocopied list. "Then how about a painting called *Blood on the Floor*?"

"I'm wandering lost in this place, Father. But, to my eye, every painting here seems to celebrate lostness."

"Do you think so?" the priest said. Then he recited, "If all art is but an imitation of nature, then this Francis Bacon character must have really liked imitating its nastiest processes."

"That sounds like a squawk," Lingenfelter said.

"Sadly, an unpublished one." The priest either smiled or scowled. "Forgive my intrusion." When he walked from the chamber into the next room, the air in his cassock's wake actually crackled.

Sylvester Jowell touched a finger to his face, which shone like a life mask lit from behind by a candle. Overlapping taped commentaries buzzed in the headsets of people in other rooms, a faint out-of-sync chorus.

"What did you want of me?" Jowell asked Lingenfelter.

"A telephone number. An e-mail address. A name. The identity of the 'Squawk of the Week' killer."

"What if I admitted my sole culpability?"

"I'd turn you in to the police as a prime suspect! I'd also fight to haul you into the stationhouse to sign such a confession!"

"Prime?" Jowell said. "Provocative word." He shimmered in his slacks and jersey. His skin glimmered. The folds of the grey curtain behind him foregrounded themselves so that they resembled the bars of a cage. Jowell grabbed them with his pale hands. Then he let go and peeled back the front of his knit shirt to reveal the fatty wings of his own ribcage. Without wholly dissolving, his face melted. His mouth opened, but no sound issued from it. The curtain at his back flickered like an electric field, its folds continuing to mimic the solidity of prison bars. Jowell's body and face phased in and out of reality, wavering between freedom and encagement.

Elsewhere, the sounds of shuffling feet and talking headsets told Lingenfelter that he had not suffered a psychotic break. Upon entering the show, he had seen a

framed black-and-white photograph of Francis Bacon, middle-aged and shirtless. Triumphant in his own frank animality, Bacon held aloft in each hand a naked flank of meat. The distorted image of Jowell with his chest split open qualified as a living take on that still photographic image.

Lingenfelter screamed and leapt to his feet.

Jowell vanished like early-morning fog. The isolated little room congealed around Lingenfelter like aspic. The drapes on the wall had folds again rather than bars, but the chamber held him fast. It held him until a member of museum security and two Atlanta policemen hurried in, handcuffed him, and escorted him out of the exhibit under the astonished gazes of a dozen visitors. Lingenfelter wondered where all these people had come from.

** Stone walls do not a prison make, nor iron bars a cage, but tell that to somebody who can't interpenetrate them like Superman.*

** Tomorrow my wife will receive word that I am taking the spring short course in licence-plate design.*

** If the measure of a good resort is the quality of the people you meet, this one deserves a minus five stars.*

Obsessively, Lingenfelter mentally framed squawks of a confessional sort. (It looked as if he had been framed himself.) Doing so helped pass the time. He had used his one telephone call to ring up Ernie's sister house. Then he had asked Ernie to contact his lawyer, his wife, his agent, and Heather Farris at the *Harbinger*. Maybe she had some pull with local law enforcement. She could certainly testify to his good character, his reliability as a book reviewer, and his essential innocence, even if he did write down-and-dirty mystery thrillers.

In the presence of his daunted attorney, Cleveland Bream, the police had grilled Lingenfelter about the squawk murders. Nan did not call. Later, the police summoned him from a fusty basement cell for a visit with Ernie Salter in their favourite interrogation room. All through this low-key talk, Lingenfelter knew that detectives were watching through a two-way mirror, eavesdropping on every word. Ernie promised to do all he could to help and then drove home. Heather Farris neither telephoned nor visited. Back downstairs, Lingenfelter wrote his private squawks.

Eventually, a guard approached to inform him that he had another visitor. "Don't get up," the guard said. "This one's coming to you – an honest-to-God Catholic priest. So don't do anything antisocial or violent, okay?"

"A priest?"

The guard read from a manifest: "Diego Fahey, S. J."

"I'm not Catholic," Lingenfelter protested. But the guard simply ignored him and left. Minutes later, the same spectral priest who had spoken to him in the High Museum loomed over him like a vulturine confessor.

Lingenfelter's hands went clammy, as if encased in latex gloves. His stomach cramped repeatedly. Did anyone ever bother to search a priest? This one's cassock sleeves could

have concealed a National Guard arsenal – or, at least, a carving knife or two, an automatic pistol, and a fold-up machete.

"Pleased to see you again," Father Fahey said. "Sorry it's under these dreary circumstances."

"What's the S. J. stand for?"

"Society of Jesus." Father Fahey's pupils glittered like bits of obsidian. "Why? What did you *think* they stood for?"

"I couldn't have said. Do you happen to know Sylvester Jowell?"

"No, I don't. Interesting name, though."

"Interesting initials, too."

"I suppose so. Did his initials lead you to assume a connection between him and us Jesuits?" Without asking, Father Fahey sat beside Lingenfelter on his narrow cot and gripped his knee. "Because we don't know him. We've never known him. His opinions distress us. His motives defy our comprehension." The grip on Lingenfelter's knee grew more insistent, as painful as the flexion of a raptor's talons. Father Fahey's pupils – his dark-brown irises, for that matter – abruptly clouded, as if someone had pressed discs of smoked glass over them. "Shhh," he said. "Don't cry out. Love is the Devil, but silence gets all manner of wickedness done."

From one cassock sleeve Father Fahey pulled a wooden ruler with a thin copper edge and some sort of writing implement. From the other he extracted a switchblade that Lingenfelter dimly associated with the Cross...

Heather Farris perched at Lingenfelter's bedside in Henry Grady Memorial Hospital. For 20 minutes she had apologized for ratting him out to the police after identifying Sylvester Jowell to him as the Squawk Jock. She apologized for failing to heed Ernie Salter's notification of his arrest. She apologized for the peculiar wounds that the priest had inflicted upon him in a fugue of profound enthrallment after cajoling his way into Lingenfelter's cell. As Heather spoke, the mole on her jaw occupied almost all his attention.

Apparently, Father Fahey had placed the wooden ruler across Lingenfelter's windpipe until Lingenfelter blacked out. Then he had measured the cell's dimensions in feet and inches. He wrote the length, height, and breadth of the cage on its rear wall in bright pearl-grey numerals. Then he placed Lingenfelter on the floor, cut away his shirt, and used the switchblade to gouge four star-shaped badges of flesh out of his torso. He was bent over Lingenfelter carving a fifth star into his chest, right above the heart, when the police broke in and seized him. If the cuts had gone much deeper, Lingenfelter would not have awakened.

Heather said, "You don't know how glad I was to see your eyes open, Harry."

Lingenfelter nodded. He wondered how Diego Fahey, S. J., had read his mind. He wondered if capturing and subduing the priest, whom Heather said had no memory of assaulting him, would put an end to the squawk murders. He feared the opposite. If the real agency behind the slayings could inspire new killers with epigrammatic

thoughts out of the mental ether, the bizarre assaults would go on. Fahey struck Lingenfelter as a mere cat's-paw whom Sylvester Jowell had felled by channelling and focusing the destructive essence of innumerable malign squawks, brilliant and banal.

The ruler across Lingenfelter's throat had rendered him temporarily mute. He knew this without even trying to talk. Heather detected his agitation and handed him a notepad and a pen. He worked to position them properly and then scratched out on the pad's top sheet: *What's happened to Jowell?*

"He's disappeared," Heather said. "I think he knew that Diego Fahey, S. J., had outlived his usefulness. What serial killer in his cunning right mind attempts a murder in a locked jail cell?"

No one knew where Jowell had gone, but Heather had an idea. The Francis Bacon exhibit at the High closed tomorrow and moved across country to a museum – Heather could not remember its name – in the San Francisco Bay area. This fact struck her as suggestive. Lingenfelter pondered it for about 30 seconds and then scrawled a message on his notepad: *Need to rest.*

Although his doctors had advised him not to, on Sunday Lingenfelter attended Chick Morrow's funeral. He sat with Lorna Riley in a pew reserved for close friends of the deceased, but he could not stop thinking of a melancholy Lily Tomlin observation: *"We're all in this alone."* So far as Lingenfelter knew, no one had ever ripped off this clever remark and submitted it to "The Squawk Box."

The young priest officiating at the service did his earnest best to contradict both this unspoken sentiment and the artist Francis Bacon's love affair with portraits of caged and screaming popes. He exuded humility and calm. Some of his serenity passed into Lingenfelter. After all, Chick Morrow had considered Lingenfelter a friend, Lorna Riley had invited him to come, and not one mourner looked at him as if his presence in any way profaned these rites.

An alien thought – a squawklike saying – struggled to rise into Lingenfelter's consciousness. He could tell by its alien edge that it had originated elsewhere – in the troubled, alcoholic depths of Francis Bacon's own personality, in fact. At length he had this terrible epigram firm and entire in his head: *"I always think of friendship as where two people can really tear each other to pieces."* Lingenfelter's mouth opened in awe and horror.

Lorna Riley nudged him and whispered, "What's wrong, Harry?"

Lingenfelter tried to tell her, but all that he heard escaping his lips was a hideous, inarticulate squawk.

Philip Lawson "occupies homes in Pine Mountain, Georgia, and Providence, Rhode Island, using ■ different alias in each place," according to a book blurb. But Lawson is better known as Michael Bishop and Paul Di Filippo, neither of whom needs an introduction to regular *Interzone* readers. Under their joint pseudonym they have published two amusing crime novels, *Would it Kill You to Smile?* (1998) and *Muskrat Courage* (2000).

The Comeback Season

Daniel Kaysen

I tried to catch Charley's eye, but he was distracted. Ray was starting up again.

"Turn the goddamn screens on, Charley. It's the play-offs, man. Can't not watch the play-offs."

Charley just glowered at him from behind the bar. Charley is six-foot four tall and 250 pounds of unfaded muscle. Most customers shut up after a glower from him, but Ray saw service in the Sino war: he had the war-wounded, prematurely aged walk to prove it. The slogan on the back of his biker's jacket read *I know I'm going to heaven, 'cause I've done my time in hell*. It took more than a glower to put Ray down.

"But Charley –"

"It's my bar, Ray. You don't like it, you get your own bar."

"Sit down, Ray," said Al, Ray's brother. Al had served in Sino too and Ray usually listened to him, but you could tell it just wasn't a listening kind of day, for Ray.

"It's a free country," he said, "I can watch what I like."

"It's not a free country any more, Ray," said Charley, softly. "It's Plan Man country now."

"Yeah, but it's the *play-offs*, Charley!"

"And they're brought to you live and exclusive by Plan Man. End of story."

Ray muttered away in his corner but the argument was over.

I finally caught Charley's eye and he fixed me another drink.

Charley's bar was my favourite haunt.

It was out of town and out of the way. No one came for the décor or the sophisticated atmosphere or the warm welcome given to strangers. The bar was dark and con-

spiratorial and it existed just on the edge of the law. It was the perfect place for my mourning.

For a start, it never showed sports. My brother had been a rising football star, and before the accident that killed him I caught every game I could. Now I found all sports too painful to watch.

And I liked the bar because they left me alone. None of the guys felt the need to patronize me by telling me that life goes on. None of them thought that what the deceased's sister needed to restore her lust for life was a night of dubious no-strings sex. Or if they did think that, they kept their thoughts private. I felt safer in Charley's than in any suit-infested bar with its tasteful lighting and its air-conditioning that just circulated the pick-up lines without ever actually expelling them.

And the third reason to drink here was Charley. The service was slow, but he was always good for credit. And an argument.

Like when I told him that I sort of admired Plan Man, truth be told. "Better a media takeover than taking the planet with violence."

Plan Man had bought Hollywood and now they were buying up sports – teams, players, media rights, everything.

Charley shook his head. "There's stuff you don't know," he said. "They're not as innocent as they seem."

"Maybe, maybe not," I said. Who knew what to believe about the aliens?

They were shrewd, though, that was for certain. Their operation was seamless: commercials on their channels were always for Plan Man-related products, and the commercials all featured stars from the various fields that

Plan Man owned: sports, holos, reality TV. Each promoted the other. Perfect.

Even Charley agreed with me that it was a textbook all-fronts campaign, with the aliens unseen behind the myriad human stars of their empire. They ran the world and no one knew what they looked like.

We argued about that too.

I guessed that the aliens were fat and old-fashioned, like factory owners or railroad barons, with cigar breath and watch-chains, plotting the next stage of their planet-wide brainwashing strategy.

Charley said I was wrong and that the aliens were skinny little geeks who had never been picked for sports at their alien school and couldn't get dates on a Saturday night, so they took off into space to find some other planet they could be kings of.

Ray disagreed with us both and claimed the aliens were just like us, probably, but they had superior tech. "They've got superior women, too, most likely," Ray said.

Charley told him to shut up.

There was one more reason I drank at Charley's.

Ever since the crash that killed my brother I knew that there was always a delay between horror and the hearing of it.

I had always thought that if something happened to my kin I would know, somewhere in my bones, instantly. But that afternoon I knew nothing. For two-and-half hours of my brother's death I was unaware, and each smile in that time now seemed treachery, sacrilege.

At Charley's, though, there was always a scanner.

When the aliens gave the cops new and supposedly secure radios Charley just came through with an improved – and stolen, of course – scanner that meant we could still hear all the cop frequencies, clear as crystal. He had the scanner on behind the bar, quiet enough not to compete with the music, but loud enough so that if you sat at the end of the bar you could hear it pretty good.

I always sat at end of the bar, listening to the cop chat and the call signs and the codes for accident and fatality, safe in the knowledge that I knew when darkness descended as soon as anyone did.

It was a strange sort of comfort, but it was all I had left. And then, that afternoon of the unseen play-offs, I heard something new.

"Charley, kill the music," I said.

Charley doesn't take kindly to orders but he heard my tone and hit the switch that silenced the music. The whole bar listened to what I had heard.

The scanner was going crazy.

Too many voices speaking at once: police call-signs and directions and garbled orders, all overlapping. It was hard to pick out much clearly, but two sentences stuck out from the babble.

One was, "It's heading for Charley's bar."

And then, after some static, "We have authorized shoot-to-kill."

In the distance we heard the first of the sirens, heading our way.

"Looking like a raid, boys," Charley said.

In any other bar news of a raid would mean the boys would be stashing illegal guns out of sight. But this was Charley's, an out-of-town bar, and Charley had an understanding with the police: they didn't raid his bar and Charley's customers didn't shoot them.

So guns came out on tables, and Charley got his shotgun from behind the bar. It wasn't much of a gun, compared to what was on the tables but Charley always said it would do the job if the time came he ever had to use it.

Then there were more sirens in the distance, and the mood in the bar froze. Ray cocked his head. "Chopper, too," he said. "Probably got a sniper up there."

I listened to the scanner, trying to pick out individual voices, trying to catch the details and grasp the tone. The main tone I heard was panic. Something was getting away from the police. Something they very badly wanted to kill. Something on its way here.

"Must be a rogue," Charley whispered to me.

"Rogue? As in *alien*?"

I had a sudden vision of a fat alien man from the stars, running from his Plan Man kin. But Charley didn't get a chance to elaborate.

"Car!" shouted Al, who was peering out of the corner of a window. "Car coming up, cops about 100 yards behind."

We heard the car then, screaming towards us, braking too late, and the crash as it came to an uncontrolled stop out front.

We heard the rifle shots from the chopper too.

"He's coming in!" shouted Al.

Every man and boy in the place aimed at the door. There was a moment's stillness and then the door swung open.

The alien stood there in the doorway, its tall thin body silhouetted in the winter sun.

There was another moment's stillness.

A sniper's bullet hit it in the back of the shoulder and it slowly fell forward, face down.

Charley and I – as if I was going to miss this – ran to the door. We took hold of the alien under the arms and pulled it to safety behind the bar.

"Turn it over," said Charley.

We did so.

"Mary Mother of God," whispered Charley as we saw its face.

"He alive?" Ray shouted over to us. The alien was out of his sight.

"Definitely alive," I called back. "But it sure ain't a he."

She was wearing an old worn sweatshirt and jeans, hair cropped and dirty as though she'd been sleeping rough. Her eyes were distant with pain. But all that detail faded away when you looked at her face.

"I wonder if they all look like that?" I said, half to Charley, half to myself.

All I knew was that maybe only a handful of human women in the world looked anything like her, and I guessed they all worked the catwalks, earning tens of thousands of dollars just for getting out of bed.

Her face had an angular beauty you couldn't hope to paint. She was ethereal and perfected. She was definitely

not one of us.

But she was surely bleeding like a human.

"The wound?" I suggested. Charley shook himself into action and started cutting away at the shoulder of the sweatshirt where the blood was, while I wiped sweat off her brow.

Her eyes opened.

"Do you speak English?" I asked slowly and clearly, like speaking to a child.

"Yes," she said. She turned her attention to Charley. "Am I hurt?"

"Just flesh," he said.

She nodded, shaking slightly with the shock. "There's going to be comebacks," she said. Her voice tinged with an alien accent. "They're not going to let this stay local. They're going to get back-up."

"You mean back-up like the Feds?" I said.

She laughed at that, without humour. "No. I mean the Corps."

At least, that's what I thought she had said.

"The Marines?" I asked.

"The *Core*," she corrected me. "C-O-R-E."

"What's that?"

"The Core is your worst nightmare," she said simply. "Your very worst nightmare."

I had no answer to that. Instead I stood up and looked around the bar.

The guys at the windows were watching the stopped police, but the rest of the bar was looking at me, for news.

"The, er, fugitive's a female," I told the bar. I wasn't going to mention she was an alien till I had to. "She's going to be fine."

Then the scanner stopped dead, all the babble cut off suddenly in mid-panic.

A single voice came over the frequencies. It was a voice you would obey, even if you didn't want to. It was a voice I knew I would hear in the cold dark of insomnia for years to come.

A voice as flat and calm and deep as the grave.

"This is Core," it said. "All police to disperse. Core back-up will arrive in four minutes 52 seconds. Hold silence and disperse. This is Core."

"Shit," said the alien, and looked at her watch, marking the arrival time. She painfully stood and looked around. Her eyes flicked to the screens.

"No sports?"

"I don't show Plan Man propaganda," Charley told her. She nodded as if she understood. "Anyone else met the Core before?" she said to the bar at the large.

"I fought alongside them in Sino," said Al unevenly. Even Al wasn't immune to the most stunning face any of us had ever seen, alien or not.

"Never been proven the Core was there," she said.

"Ma'am, the Marines were –"

She shook her head. "Christ, if Plan Man were sending the *Marines* here then we'd have a chance. Look," she said to the bar in general, "go home, all of you. Go home now."

The heavily armed ranks of Charley's bar blinked when they heard that.

"I'm serious," she said. "You're out of your depth. This is big boys' rules now. Go."

"Not when it's just going to get interesting," said Ray.

Al added his voice to that sentiment. "We're stayin' right here, ma'am. We never leave a man behind. Or a woman."

The alien looked at Al as if he were a dog, failing to understand a simple command.

"The Core have got moves you've never seen, moves you can't even imagine," she said. "Guns aren't going to be any use." The armed men bristled at the suggestion that their weaponry was superfluous. She changed her tack. "Besides, the bar's closing. Isn't it Charley?"

"Sure is," said Charley. "Bar's closed. Just go. Ray, Al, all of you. You wanted a fight with the cops, but they've gone now. Show's over, boys."

Someone at the window confirmed that the police cars were driving away.

The sounds of the helicopter faded into the distance.

"We'll be open tomorrow morning as usual," Charley declared.

The customers wavered.

"Go home and watch the play-offs," said Charley.

For a moment there was silence.

It was the play-offs that sealed the deal. Ray left first, then Al, and then the rest of the crew trailed out. They all took one last look at the alien as they went.

"You stay," Charley whispered to me.

Like I was going anywhere.

When it was just the three of us Charley locked the front door and pulled down the blinds.

"Three minutes five till Core arrives," said the alien.

"Are we set?"

Charley picked up his shotgun. "I'm set," he said.

"Is she set as well?" said the alien, to Charley.

"No, she doesn't know anything."

I gathered they were talking about me. "What? What don't I know?"

The alien snorted. "You're in now anyway."

I couldn't even guess what *in* was. "In what?"

She didn't like that. "This is very screwed up. If she's not in get her off the premises." For the first time I heard an edge of anxiety in her voice.

Charley heard it too and tried to placate her. "I was going to tell her, but the right time never came."

"You should have made the right time."

"She's been depressed."

"*Quel horreur*," she said.

"Charley, tell me, quickly."

He took a deep breath. "I used to be a pro. NFL."

Well, that figured.

"But when Plan Man took over they changed the contracts, mid-season. New codes of personal behaviour were introduced."

"Like what?"

"Sex. Drugs. Rock'n'roll. All frowned on. And endorsement of PM products became compulsory."

"So you said no to the contract."

"Thing is, you can't say no. So I ran, went underground. See, people who say no to the contract tend to get

suicidal..." He broke off, struggling for a way to tell me something he didn't want to say.

"Suicidal how?" I asked. At the back of my mind I heard the first whisper of darkness.

He shook his head.

"Come on Charley, you can tell me. What sort of suicide?"

"Involuntary suicide," he said. "If you see what I mean. It's -"

He couldn't frame the words. So the alien did.

"They make the murder look like an accident," she said. "Like a car crash, say."

I understood. "They killed my brother," I said.

No one corrected me.

My world swung round by 180 degrees.

I saw the Plan Man moons that had watched over his burial, photographing the mourners, all of us deceived into thinking fate - like a lone gunman, like a random madman - had taken my brother's life unaided.

I saw myself, in a black dress, throw flowers in the grave, and throw away all peace, all sleep, as I did so.

I saw my brother's faceless killers who slept easy in their alien beds at night.

All that time I had hated fate and accidents and death, I should have hated murder. I should have hated Plan Man.

All of me compressed to a small diamond centre of fire and understanding.

"Whatever Core is, bring them on," I said. "I'm in."

Charley explained it. "Core are top-level Plan Man security."

"And they're coming here?"

"Yeah."

I looked over at the door. "Shouldn't we have barricades or something?"

Charley shook his head. "Nope, they use alien tech. They're going to materialize right inside the bar."

"One minute thirty," said the alien.

"Materialize?"

"Yup. There'll be a red haze, and a member of Core will step through with a gun."

"Then what?"

"Then I shoot him, hopefully before he shoots me. He won't know that we've got a scanner and that we're expecting him. Then we run."

"Run where?"

"You should have briefed her already," said the alien.

"You didn't give us any warning you were coming, Lisette."

Lisette? He had used her name. I'd been there the whole time and she hadn't introduced herself, yet Charley had used her name.

"You *know* her, Charley?" I asked him.

He closed his eyes. I'd said the wrong thing.

"You mean you *don't* know me?" the alien said, incredulous. "Jesus, Charley."

"Who are you, then?"

"She's Lisette *Harper*," said Charley. As if I was meant to know that name.

"Lisette who?"

"Fucking unbelievable," she said. "Fifty seconds, Charley."

"I don't keep up with famous aliens," I said, anger rising.

Charley coughed. "Thing is," he said, "Lisette here isn't an alien."

My cognitive traffic achieved gridlock. "You're not from the stars?" I said to her.

"I'm from the suburbs, originally, but we don't talk about that. I'm a hypermodel."

"Like a robot?" I was thinking she was like a Terminator, maybe. Charley showed me that 2D on the bars' screens, once, when everyone else had gone. It was just coloured shadows and a big ugly man in a leather jacket. I had fallen asleep 20 minutes in.

"No, a hypermodel's one up from a supermodel," Charley said. "Too big for the catwalks."

"Two up, actually," corrected Lisette. "I keep a dozen lookalikes in work. Not that they look alike, really, of course."

"She's a very important part of the rebellion," Charley told me. "Highest ranking rogue there is. Like Che Guevara, but with an agent. Her mother's ex-head of PM cable. Her sister Jeanne is -"

"Five seconds," Lisette interrupted.

Charley took his gun and pointed it at the open space of the room.

A hint of red appeared in front of us.

"Two seconds," said Lisette.

"Showtime," whispered Charley.

The red became a haze, and out of the haze a figure stepped, his tall thin body silhouetted against the deep crimson light.

He was humanoid, manlike, wearing a long grey coat. He was carrying a gun but it was pointed at the floor. He did not expect a welcoming committee, did not know of our warning from the scanner.

His eyes searched ours in shock as he brought his gun up.

His eyes locked with mine and he froze.

Charley stepped close to the figure and fired, twice.

The mind speeds up in crisis, so time slows down.

I saw the alien's body falling and his blood scattering into the air like doves released.

I saw Charley blinking at the blast of the gun. I saw Lisette turning away, not wanting to witness it.

I saw the doves reaching across the room to the walls, and the body beginning to bend in two, in the winter sunlight.

I had a sudden flashbulb memory of the funeral roses I had held, and the grave in which we had buried my brother.

The brother I had loved.

The self-same brother who had just stepped out of the red haze.

The brother whose eyes had just now locked with mine, and recognized me, as I had recognized him.

The brother who now fell to the floor, quite broken.

Time flowed slower still. All things were seen clearly, as they are when drowning.

I saw the blood's pool slowly encircling the body, the walls' stains beginning to drip and run, in contrast to the stillness of his limbs.

I saw the light failing outside.

I saw my hands, coming up to my face, to obliterate the sight. I felt the air knocked out of me by shock.

Yet shock also spirited a portion of my mind away to a higher safety, from where I could watch and analyze. Rationalize.

Lisette had said that Core were "your worst nightmare." In which case, a portion of my mind told me winningly, that was all this was. A nightmare, some trick of figure and form, the body just a fake, a mock-up of my brother, made with alien tech.

I tugged on that thought like a loose thread and my need to scream began to lessen. Adrenaline ebbed a little and breathing came back. I took in air again and wondered how they did it, how they made the figure look so lifelike.

Charley's arms held me as I tried to breathe myself back to reality. "They sent her *brother*," he said to Lisette, to explain.

"Unbelievable," she said, with sympathy this time.

"It was pretty convincing, wasn't it?" I said, smiling bravely. "It looked exactly like him. Christ. What a nightmare."

I moved out of Charley's arms and looked at the ripped body on the floor, its face now twisted away from me. "So who is it, really? Or what is it, really?"

I touched the illusion with my foot, to see if it was holo. It wasn't. It was solid.

"A robot?" I said, not knowing the signs, wishing I'd paid attention to the 2D Charley had showed me. "What is it?"

Lisette came over and took my hand and watched me puzzle at the corpse.

I turned to her. "Tell me what the trick is, really," I said.

"It's what you first thought it was," she said, squeezing my hand tight.

I shook free of her hand. "But I told you, I thought it was my brother."

"I know," she said. "I know." And her distant eyes said that I had been right.

There lay my brother's corpse – the corpse we'd never seen – at my feet.

My mind was full of protest. "But he was *alive*, when he stepped through," I said.

"I know."

My denial fell like castle walls.

I stumbled backwards against the bar and slid down it till I was sitting on the floor, my arms wrapped around my knees.

He was alive all this time. We had mourned an empty coffin and buried a box of stones.

He was alive all this time. All this time until now.

"Go," was the only word I could manage.

"We can't leave her," Lisette said. "Charley, you should stay with her."

"You're too important," he said. To Lisette, not me. "And you need a co-driver."

"We can't leave her with the body. He's Core," said Lisette.

"He's dead," I said, finding a voice from somewhere.

"That's the trouble with Core," said Lisette.

"What is?" I said.

And then there was a sound from across the room. I looked to where the sound was coming from.

My brother's arm was moving.

"The trouble with Core is that they come back," said Lisette.

"Lisette, we've got to go. Now," said Charley. "I'm starting the car." He went out back.

Lisette came over to me and kissed my forehead.

I heard Charley starting the engine outside.

My brother's arm moved again.

"Come back from where?" I asked her, in a small voice I didn't recognize as my own any more.

"Back from the dead," she said.

The engine revved again. She squeezed my hand helplessly and she walked-ran out of the bar.

My brother turned his shattered head toward me.

Everything went black.

When I came round again shock gave everything a grey sheen and a distance. My commentating brain had closed down. There was just the sight. There was just the scene.

I watched as my brother's features knitted together again, healed again. Congealed again.

When his mouth formed it was formed in a shape of great pain.

Someone came to the front door of the bar at one point, banged on the frame, asking if anyone was there. I let out no noise and they went away again.

I watched his torso heal, too.

Organs were born first, blossomed and pulsed in their cage of bone. Tendons and muscle slowly crept into place. Then skin, like a fall of ash, coated the whole.

The skin had a tremor, when it was completed, like that which comes with extreme cold. Or fear.

The phone rang, but I didn't move. The caller hung up after 20 rings or so.

I watched my brother's breath begin again. I watched him swallow. I watched him open his eyes, slowly. Graveridden eyes.

It took him a while to remember how to see.

The police came, thumped on the door, ordered whoever was in there to open up.

They waited. I didn't move. They left.

I watched their blue lights fading.

My brother's eyes focused on me. I watched him parsing my form. A woman, sitting on the floor hunched up, her back against the bar.

He looked at my face and I saw him recognize me again. But his eyes were wrong. They were distant and abstract. They were looking out but staring inwards, as eyes do after trauma.

His voice was wrong, too, when he spoke. His voice was flat and calm and deep as the grave.

"This is Core."

"The core of what?" I asked him. The one question I'd never asked of Lisette.

"The core of Hell," he said.

My brother's eyes flickered, once, as he said it. Only

once. And then they returned to their inward stare.

When he was healed enough to move he raised himself to his feet. I went over to him, to try to help him. He waved me off.

"Please," he said. "Leave me."

"I can't," I said.

"My only way out is to exchange places with the living," his eyes focused then, looked at me. He reached down for his fallen gun, and when he was upright again he pointed it at me. "I want to do that, I want to exchange places."

I backed away. He nodded.

The gun wavered and he lowered it slowly, some decision made. He took a stiff step, like an elderly man, leaving.

"Why didn't you sign the contract?" I said.

"Plan Man wanted me to swap teams," he said, voice empty.

He gestured into the air and the red was summoned, and then there was a crimson haze. His gateway back.

I had to say something. Even my mourning had been a betrayal now. "We thought you were dead," I said. "There was a funeral."

"I *was* dead," he said, turning to look at me for the last time. Then he took another step and the haze took him and he was gone.

The haze disappeared.

Winter sunlight, finally, was all there was. The bar closed and empty. Silence through the room's space, broken only by the murmur of cops on the scanner, talking of things of no significance. Ordinary death was mundane now, soft-edged, like something simplified and painted in pastels in a storybook for children. The worst the cops ever had to deal with could not match what I had seen.

I was emptied. There were no tools for feeling. I tried to remember the pastor's words from the funeral, so I could say them now, a prayer for the departed.

But the words were gone from my memory and I did not chase them. I just sat as the sunlight dimmed and the bar was overtaken by shadows.

That night I slept on the floor of the bar where my brother had fallen, alone with the blood of ghosts.

Morning.

Waking to the sound of banging on the door. I opened my eyes. I was still on the floor, stiff and cold and wrung out, even after sleep.

More banging, from the back door then, but I did not move.

Finally the sound of a key, turning in the lock. The back door opened. Two figures in the doorway, silhouetted against the winter sunrise.

I stood up unsteadily as Ray and Al came in out of the dawn's cold.

Ray put the lights on. "What happened yesterday?" he said, sombre.

"Charley and the woman got away," I said.

Ray took in the blood on the walls. "Yeah? Well, someone didn't." He looked round for a body.

"The body went too," I said.

Ray nodded. The disappearance of bodies is not a novelty, in Ray's world.

"You look like you need a coffee," he said. He went behind the bar to fix one for us all. "Think Charley's coming back?" he asked.

"No. No, he's not coming back."

"Guess not," said Ray. Something unspoken passed between him and his brother. "I think we just got ourselves a bar, Al."

"Guess we did," said his brother.

We sat by the bar and drank the coffee and listened to the murmur of small crime and gossip on the scanner, relayed in human voices.

"Well," said Ray, experimentally, "if Charley's not coming back I guess we could –" With a flick of a switch the screens came to life. They were showing a replay of the play-off game from the day before.

Men ran and caught and hit and rose again in the abstract dance, on the green of the arena.

The Planet Management logo was worn by everyone, even the commentators.

"Unless you object?" said Ray.

"No," I said. "I don't object." I was past protest. I was past taking sides. I was past everything.

We watched the game.

I sat next to Ray and Al as they talked players and tactics, quiet scholars of an ancient theatre I had studied long ago and since forgotten.

At half-time Ray cleaned the blood off the floor and walls. The sun had risen by the time he was done wringing the last of the scarlet out of the cloth and he came back over to me.

"Didn't think it'd be you I'd see in here," he said, "when we came back." He said it carefully, like a statement he'd been rehearsing.

"Who did you expect?" I said, hearing dark's whisper again.

"Expected your brother. Must have been a brave man to go back. You were his ticket out of hell."

He watched me as I looked at him.

There was the ghost of a tremor in Ray's hand, I saw now. I looked in his eyes, as I'd never really done before, and saw there was a ghost there too, a flicker of something long ago locked in. Released now, but remembering. And Ray's movements had always been too slow. I'd thought it had been a war wound, picked up in Sino, but his gait was an echo of my brother's.

He watched me as I registered the signs.

"I died in Sino but Plan Man brought me back. Scooped me up out of my grave and signed me up for Core. I went through the red haze a few times. Died a few times more. Killed one eventually, a target, and got my ticket back here."

The hand with the tremor moved on top of mine, and I could feel its murmur of cold fear.

"Trouble is, they never let you leave entirely. They always have it hanging over you, a return there. It's a hell of a threat – the healing's much worse than the dying. So when they ask you to do something, you do it."

"You're on Plan Man's side," I said.

"Everyone is, sooner or later. But, yeah, I'm Plan Man. I tipped them off about Charley's scanner. Not hard, seeing as how I was the one that stole it in the first place, on Plan Man orders. It's all their orders." He took a sip of the hot dark coffee. "Everything's their orders."

He lit a cigarette and exhaled grey smoke like he'd lived 100 years already.

Then he walked slowly round to behind the bar. "Actually, may as well turn the scanner off now."

Ray hit a switch and the police voices fell silent.

I went and stood out back and looked up at the artificial moons. I felt small and lost and alone. Meaning had been washed out of me like blood from the walls.

After a while Ray came out and joined me and we stood watching the town in the distance, smoking our cigarettes, thinking our thoughts.

"Lisette is ex-Core too, isn't she?" I asked him. She had the tremor, which I had ascribed to the shock of being shot. She had the eyes, which I had ascribed to pain.

Ray said: "Maybe, maybe not. Hard to tell."

I tried to come up with an answer to that, but before I could find something to say Al called out. "Third quarter's starting."

We went back into the bar. The teams had swapped

ends at half-time, and each team now ran in the reverse of the direction I was used to from the first half. But in a few minutes I grew accustomed to it.

Just as the game wrapped up there was banging on the door. I flinched.

"It's okay," said Ray. He went to the door and let the first of the day's customers in.

"Want to serve?" Ray asked me, cautious. He didn't know what I was strong enough for, after what I had been through.

I had a strange new mourning to do, now, for a brother who might yet die over and over, but might also finally return, as Ray had done. I didn't know what I was strong enough for either, but I had to do something.

I went behind the bar and took down a glass and the day started and life, of a sort, went on again.

Daniel Kaysen lives in Brighton. His previous Plan Man (Planet Management) story, "The Eight-Moon Dollar," appeared in *Interzone* 178. Since he wrote that first piece for *IZ*, he has sold a further five stories, including one to Maxim Jakubowski's forthcoming *Mammoth Book of Tales of the Road*.

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Hole in the Wall

Zoran Živković

The hospital attendant walking in front of me went up to door number seven on the left. It was made of white metal, like all the others in the hall. Compared to the dark-red wall they looked like widely spaced teeth in a giant jaw. He unbolted a small rectangular peep-hole, opened it, peered inside briefly, then bolted it again.

"You shouldn't have any trouble with her. We put her in a straitjacket, but not because she's aggressive towards others. She tried to commit suicide, as you know." He indicated the file I was holding. "Just in case, I'll stay close by. If you need me, all you have to do is call."

I nodded. The attendant took a magnetic card out of the breast pocket on his white coat, swiped it through the small terminal by the doorframe and opened the door. He let me go in, but didn't close the door after me. He stayed there, watching. I turned towards him and nodded once again. The heavy door closed on its hinges almost soundlessly and the attendant's large figure disappeared behind it.

I have never liked the white colour of the padding that lines the walls and floors of these rooms, as though someone has taken great pains to increase the anxiety of the patients forced to spend time there. The same can be said of the bright neon lighting that is never turned off, nor even turned down during the night. The only thing that disrupted the depressive uniformity of the room was a small window high up next to the ceiling on the wall facing the door. It was actually a ventilation shaft with two thick vertical bars instead of glass. This metal protection was quite superfluous; it was impossible to climb up there even if a person were unencumbered by a straitjacket, and nothing larger than a cat could squeeze through it.

The girl was sitting under that opening, her back leaning against the wall. Her legs were bent and her chin was resting on her knees. She looked at me, smiling. I recognized the person whose photo I'd seen in the hospital file: a round face, large, lively brown eyes, small ears, a short, slightly turned-up nose. Dark blonde hair reached to her shoulders. Only a rough attempt had been made to comb it, but this did little to diminish the discrete beauty of her face. As it was, her uncombed hair actually

made her look younger; if I hadn't known that she was 26, I wouldn't have given her more than 22 or 23 years.

I dropped to the floor myself, leaning against the door. I always try to put myself at the same level as my patients. As a rule, this creates an impression of equality and helps establish contact with them. I stretched out both legs so the bottoms of my shoes touched the easily soiled padding as little as possible. I put the green file on the floor next to me.

"Hello, Miss Katarina," I said, returning her smile. "How are you?"

"Hello, Doctor. I'm fine now. I'm glad you came."

"Let me introduce myself. I'm Dr Alexander. I'm replacing Dr Sonja who has been in charge of you up to now. She had an accident and will be absent from work for two or three weeks. Luckily it wasn't anything serious. She fell down the stairs in her house and broke her shin. Her leg is in a cast, but she's in fine spirits. She's slowly getting used to the crutches."

"Poor Dr Sonja. Please tell her that I'm terribly sorry about what happened. It must have been quite painful. But, as you say, she'll get well soon. There won't be any consequences. She'll forget both the pain and the crutches."

"I hope so."

"Believe me, that's what will happen."

We looked at each other for a few moments without talking. Finally, I tapped the file on the floor. "Yes, you would know that, wouldn't you? If I've understood correctly, you feel you are able to see the future?"

"I am," she replied in an even voice, as though saying something quite ordinary.

"Perhaps you could have warned Dr Sonja of the trouble that awaited her." I said this cheerfully, in jest, certainly with no sound of reproach.

"Perhaps. But even if I had, it would have made no difference. Dr Sonja didn't believe me."

"It's not easy to believe something like that."

"I know. That's why it's easy to put someone in a place like this just because they claim they can see the future, even if it poses no threat to anyone." There was no reproach in her voice either.

"You are a threat to your own self. That is primarily

why people end up here, not because they feel they possess unusual abilities. Didn't you stop eating? And then try to commit suicide?"

"It was a clumsy, hasty attempt. Mistaken, in any case."

Silence reigned once more. I glanced at my outstretched legs and then looked at her again. She was still smiling.

"There's something I don't understand," I said, shaking my head. "It's odd that your file makes no mention of it. I don't know why Dr Sonja neglected to talk to you about something that seems to me pivotal to the whole matter: what it was that led you to attempt suicide. If what you claim is true, that you have the gift of seeing the future, then you are the last person in the world one would expect to kill herself. Many people would give their eye teeth to be in your place. It's hard to even imagine all the possibilities available to someone who knows what the future will bring."

"Of course Dr Sonja wanted to know why I tried to kill myself. But I refused to talk about it."

"Why?"

"There was a reason."

"There was? Does it still exist?"

She didn't reply at once. A questioning look flickered across her face, conveying some hesitation.

"How do you picture the future?" she answered at last, with a question.

She'd caught me off guard. I scratched the top of my head as I do automatically when something puzzles me, and then I shrugged my shoulders.

"I don't know. I haven't thought about it very much. As a time that is to come, I suppose?" Even as I spoke I realized this was highly unoriginal. I feared I'd earned her derision, but there was none forthcoming.

"Until recently that was the same attitude I had towards the future," she said in a voice full of understanding. "What will be will be. A person has little influence, if any at all. We enter the fog, not knowing what awaits us there. Then, after the accident, everything changed."

She motioned her head toward the file. This released her from the obligation of having to explain. She had rightly assumed that I'd studied her file thoroughly before coming to see her. She'd been in a serious traffic accident some three and a half months before. She was the only one of four passengers to make it out of the smashed car. And just barely. At first the doctors gave her little chance. Although there hadn't been much bodily injury, she had hit her head, resulting in a deep coma. It had taken 73 days for her to come out of it. At first there seemed to be no harmful consequences, but soon afterward she started claiming she could see the future. Of course, no one took her seriously. Similar notions appear sometimes among those who have had severe head injuries. Faced with this scepticism, Katarina first withdrew in protest, almost autistically, and then refused to eat. The surgeons soon realized she was no longer within their domain so they sent her straight from the hospital to us.

Naturally, not a bit of real progress could be expected in the mere two weeks that Dr Sonja had been working with her. As a rule, such patients require considerable time and patience. It was enough that the doctor had got her eating again. This good sign, however, was soon darkened by the unexpected suicide attempt four days previously. Fortunately, as Katarina said herself, it had been a rather clumsy attempt, easily thwarted. The rules had then required that she be transferred to this room for a while as a precautionary measure.

"In what sense did things change?" I asked.

Katarina stretched out her legs like mine and shook her head a bit to loosen her hair. These were the only two parts of her body that she could freely move. The bottoms of her pyjamas rose a bit above her socks, revealing part of her calves. I knew quite well how uncomfortable she must have been with her arms confined in the strait-jacket, but I could not change that as yet.

"The fog lifted," she replied tersely.

I waited to see if she would say anything more, but when nothing was forthcoming I spoke again.

"And the future was revealed to you?" I tried to say this without the slightest scepticism, as though stating an obvious fact.

She shook her head. "There isn't just one future. That's what confused me the most at first."

"What do you mean?"

She hesitated briefly. "It's a beam... enormous... As soon as I close my eyes, in a waking state, it's there. I see it clearly, it fills my whole field of vision under my closed eyelids. There's nothing else but the beam. It consists of an infinite number of thin strands that seem to be made of frosted glass. Each of them is a future."

She stopped a moment, as though wanting to let me absorb this image.

"But they cannot all become... real. What I mean to say..." I thought I knew what I wanted to say, but somehow I couldn't find the right words. I don't have much experience in talking about the future.

"They can't, that's it. Only one will be real in the end. But until this happens, they are all equally possible. Each of these strands. Completely equal. Until one singles itself out."

"Singles itself out?" I repeated in amazement.

"Yes. It starts to shine with an internal glow, turning transparent and expanding at the same time, pushing the others into the background. In the end it fills up the beam's whole space. That's all there is, that one future that will become real. It stands before you crystal clear. Everything can be seen in that one strand that has detached itself and expanded. Everything that will happen."

I stared at her for a while in silence. "But I can't see it," I said at last. "That's what it's all about. It seems that only you are privileged to see it."

For the first time since we'd started talking, the smile disappeared from her face.

"You don't believe me, do you?"

"It might be easier to believe you if I could understand why someone who has access to the future decided to kill

herself. We're still coming up against this issue."

She bowed her head, resting her chin on her chest. Her hair was like a veil covering her face. Behind this came only the gentle sound of slow breathing. When she spoke, her voice was muffled and somehow far away.

"What do you think, what decides which of the strands will start to glow? What decides which of the countless possible futures will become real?"

"You've got me there," was my reply after pondering briefly. "Chance, perhaps?"

She sighed deeply. "Chance, yes. That's what I thought at first. Then the ability I have acquired would still be bearable."

As she didn't continue, I asked cautiously, "If it isn't chance, then what it is?"

She raised her head again. Her hair fell back and parted, revealing the middle of her face. She reminded me of a picture I'd seen on a billboard somewhere. "Not what but who," she said, more softly than before.

I looked at her several moments, eyes blinking. "Someone chooses which future will become real? Who could that be?"

"Isn't it obvious?"

I made a rueful face. "I'm afraid not. At least not to me."

A shadow of a smile returned to her lips, as though wanting to forgive me for my lack of insight. "I don't hold it against you. I too needed some time to see what had been standing clearly before me from the beginning: I coexist with it. I, of course, am the one who makes the decision, the one who singles out the strand that will prevail over all the others. I choose the future."

"You?" This time I was unable to suppress the disbelief in my voice. "How?"

"It's actually very simple. That's what led me astray. As I look at the beam of all possible futures, my eyes under my eyelids are not quite focused. So the strands are slightly blurred. But as soon as I fix my eyes on one, it starts to detach itself. In the beginning I mistook the cause for the effect. I thought that my eyes focused on the strand that had singled itself out for some other reason, with my having nothing to do with it. But things, unfortunately, are just the opposite."

We spent about half a minute in silence. Katarina clearly felt that she had now explained everything quite nicely, and at first I didn't know how to continue the conversation. Suddenly, all my experience working with patients like this no longer seemed to help. Finally, I found my cue in her last sentence.

"Why 'unfortunately'? Isn't being able to choose the future far more advantageous than only being able to see it? Now I understand even less why you wanted to take your own life."

Katarina's face took on the expression of a teacher with a dull-witted pupil in front of her. "What's so advantageous about it?"

"Why, you could choose a future without suffering, misery, hardship. There must be some like that among those countless strands you mentioned."

She shook her head slowly. "Utopia? Heaven on earth? Don't be naïve. There is no such future. Not a single strand is without suffering, misery and hardship."

"I wasn't thinking idealistically. What I had in mind was a future in which there was very little of that. One in which most people lived happily."

"But there would still be unhappy people."

"That's inevitable, you said so yourself."

There was something reproachful, accusing in her eyes. "Would you consent to be the one to choose who should be sacrificed on the altar of the happy majority?"

She'd caught me by surprise again. My hand was already reaching mechanically for the top of my head, but I stopped it at the last moment. Scratching my head suddenly seemed out of place. "That's a very difficult question."

"Yes, it is. And just think about what a heavy burden it is for someone who, without the slightest desire, has to decide which future will become real, knowing in the process that this will inevitably bring suffering, misery and hardship to someone. No human shoulders can hold up under that. I doubt that even God's shoulders are strong enough. There is only one force capable of dealing with this chilling responsibility: the blind and impassive force of chance. I have to give back to chance what belongs to it, as soon as possible, since it has reached me by some mistake. I hope that now you understand why I have no choice."

"But suicide is certainly not the only solution."

"It isn't? What else do you suggest?" Her voice was filled with sarcasm.

"You told me that this... beam of strands of the future... only appears when you close your eyes in a waking state, isn't that right?"

"That's right."

"Well, then, don't close your eyes except when you go to bed."

She shook her head back and forth. The ends of her long blonde hair swayed as though blown by a gentle breeze. "If only things were that simple. You give me way too much credit. Do you really think that any human being could resist such temptation, could have such self-control? In any case, I tried that already. It was the frustration I felt after it failed that led me to that clumsy suicide attempt."

"Which didn't succeed, thank heavens."

"It didn't. Because it was so clumsy. There was anger and despair behind what I did, and they are poor allies if you want to do a job properly. It was only later, after I'd calmed down a bit in here, that I started to think things over coolly and collectedly." Her smile widened. "As you can see, there's a good side to being put in a straitjacket."

"That's not the only one. In a straitjacket, which is indeed rather uncomfortable, you are effectively prevented from doing something reckless. No one has managed to kill themselves in one yet."

"Then I will be the first one to succeed." I detected a hint of pride in her voice.

"How?"

"You'll soon find out. Things are underway and nothing can stop them."

"Are you quite sure about that?"

"Of course I'm sure. Don't forget the powers at my disposal. That's what finally crossed my mind, sitting here on the floor, as the anger from my failed attempt slowly dissolved. Why embark on something uncertain and questionable when everything can be carried out without fail."

"Do you think so..." I made a vague circular motion with my hand.

"I do. All I had to do was choose the future in the beam where my suicide attempt succeeds. It didn't turn out to be quite that easy, however. I picked through the strands for three full days, searching for the right one. And I finally found it."

"That means that we are already in that future?"

"We are. And it shows you how choosing what will happen is connected to inflicting pain on others. In this time strand Dr Sonja falls down the stairs. I feel really bad about it. She was kind to me and full of understanding. Please ask her to forgive me. Try to explain that it simply couldn't be avoided. Your efforts will be in vain, however. You won't be able to convince her because you will never believe it yourself. Not even after you find me dead here tomorrow."

My eyes slowly looked around the inside of the padded room. I have never liked these mournful white isolation cells, but now it seemed the most appropriate sanctuary for this girl who clearly was still in the throes of sinister thoughts. Restrained by the straitjacket, this was the only place where she was completely safe from her own self. I've had patients with suicidal tendencies from time to time, but they were all much more typical, ordinary cases. Never before had I heard such an intricate and unbelievable story. And told so convincingly. Working with her would be difficult, but also challenging. I would try to talk my colleague Sonja into letting me handle Katarina's case or at least work together with her on it when she returned from sick leave.

"Of course I won't find you dead, Katarina," I said, in a voice I hoped was the epitome of conviction and self-confidence. "You will be alive and well when I come to visit you tomorrow. How could it be otherwise? We will continue our conversation then. It is extremely interesting."

She did not reply to this. A shadow of sorrow and compassion seemed to pass over her face, like a teacher who finally realizes that all her efforts have been in vain, that her pupil is too dull-witted to understand the simple things she has explained to him.

I took the file and got up from the floor. I gave two sharp knocks on the doorframe and the attendant's face appeared in the peep-hole almost the same moment. Evidently he had been standing in front of the door. I nodded my head. When the heavy door opened, I turned towards the girl.

"Good-bye Katarina," I said cheerfully.

"Farewell, Doctor," she replied, no less cheerfully. Two friends who were parting after a pleasant chat, smiling

warmly to each other.

I didn't find her dead the next day. She hadn't meant it literally. When I arrived at the sanatorium her body had already been taken away. The initial doubts about the cause of death had been solved as well. When her breakfast had been taken in at eight o'clock they'd found her curled up on the floor in the position in which she always slept. With her back to the door. One look at her face was enough for them to realize that she was no longer alive – Katarina's pretty face was completely deformed, grotesquely bloated and distended. Whatever had caused this ugly death mask was no longer in isolation cell number seven, so it was not clear what had actually happened until the forensics report arrived.

Katarina was allergic to wasp venom. Sometime early in the morning, between six and half past seven, an insect, which could only have flown in through the opening up by the ceiling, had stung her on the left cheek. She died some 20 minutes later. Certainly before seven. There was only one problem. The girl must have been awakened by the sting. Why hadn't she called for help, since she was perfectly aware of the risk she ran? She'd had enough time, but had done nothing.

I was the one they expected to answer this question. I gave it in my first and last report on Katarina. The reason she hadn't reacted was most likely because the sting enabled the execution of her previously failed attempt. It was a very unusual suicide that had taken advantage of an unbelievable tangle of circumstances. Indeed, what are the chances that a wasp finds its way through such a small opening right into a room with an individual who is allergic to its sting? Completely insignificant, one would say. But it happened just the same. Perhaps such holes should be closed up for this reason. In any case they are almost useless. And you never know when and how such an inconceivable incident might happen again.

I said nothing about the motives that had led the girl to raise her hand against herself on two occasions. What could I have said, anyway? I'd had only one chance to talk with her, and that was certainly not enough to come to any reliable conclusion. Perhaps my colleague Sonja would be able to shed more light on the case, since she'd spent more time with Katarina. When I had finished my report, I got in my car and headed towards her house. I wanted to tell her the tragic news in person. And give her the message that had been sent the day before.

Translated from the Serbian by Alice Copple-To Ic

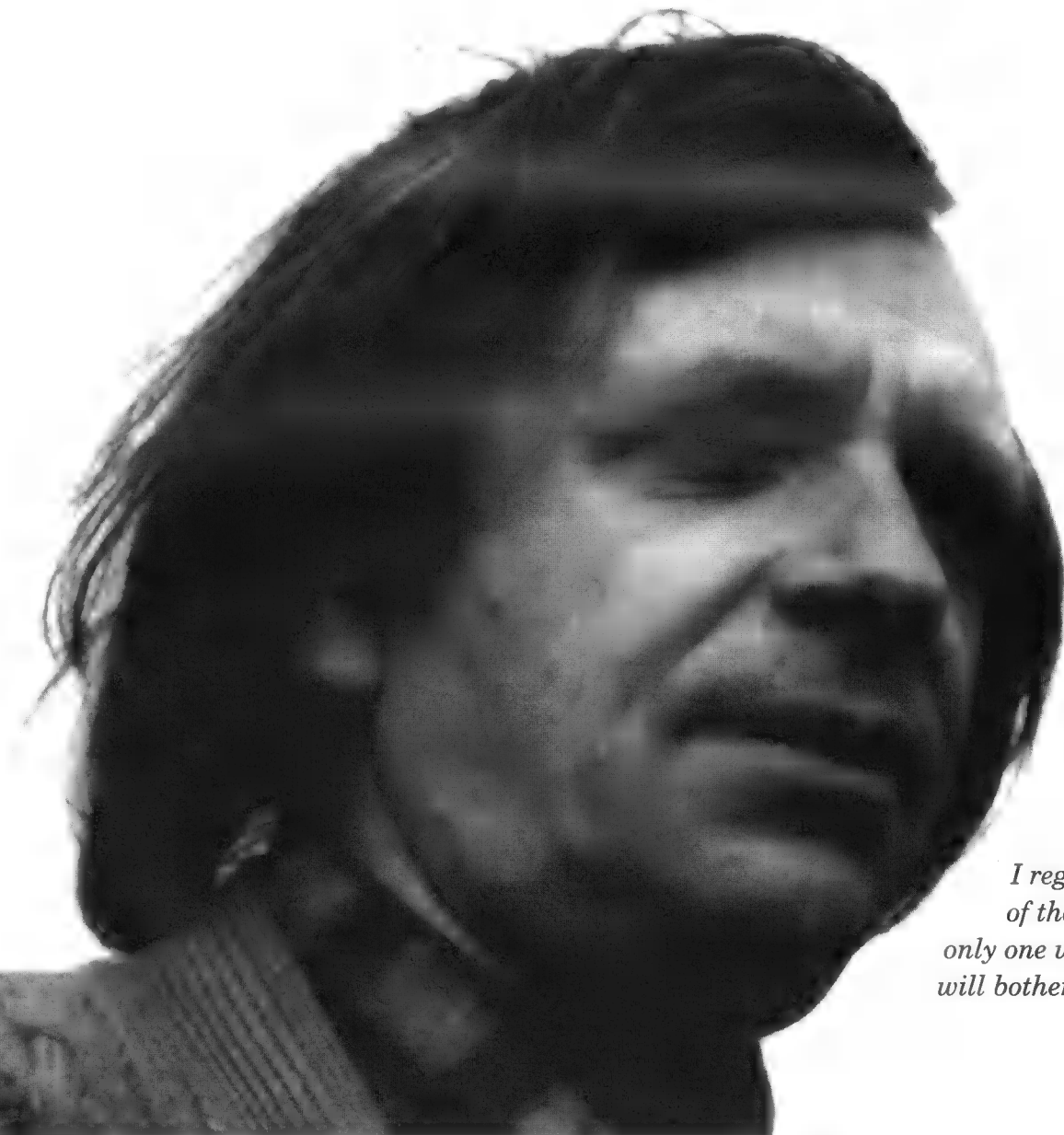
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Zoran Živković, who lives in Belgrade, last appeared in *Interzone* with "Geese in the Mist" (issue 182). His most recent work, before that piece and the above new story, is a slim volume of six linked stories called *Biblioteka* ("The Library," 2002), which has also appeared in English in an American anthology, *Leviathan 3*, edited by Jeff VanderMeer and Forrest Aguirre.

In Defence of Originality

Barrington J. Bayley

interviewed by Juha Lindroos



*"My goal is to
write good science
fiction, the sort that
blows your mind!
I regard sf as the literature
of the 20th century, and the
only one which future historians
will bother to study as they try to
understand our age." –*

Barrington J. Bayley

From the writers of today to the masters of the past, Barry Bayley's work remains influential. William Burroughs acknowledged "The Star Virus" as an early inspiration; M. John Harrison took it as a springboard for his *Centauri Device*; Mike Moorcock called him "the most original sf writer of his generation." More recently people like Stephen Baxter, Bruce Sterling, Alastair Reynolds and Walter Mosley have all championed Bayley's innovative work. Yet despite all the accolades his polished, exuberant and literate stories remain little known even among the genre's aficionados.

Never prolific, and perhaps best known for his connection with both *New Worlds* and *Interzone*, he has been quietly producing an impressive body of work: nearly 100 short stories, 16 novels, not to mention numerous juvenile adventure stories and non-fiction pieces (including a book on the Tarot). Some of his short work is collected in *The Knights of the Limits* (1978) and *The Seed of Evil* (1979), while more recent work is being included in *Gnostic Endings*, due out soon. He has recently published two new novels, *The Sinners of Erspia* and *The Great Hydration*.

Barry Bayley was born in 1937, and published his earliest stories in 1954. For the following 48 years he has been steadily working to perfect his craft.

JL: You have two new novels out this year as well as a short-story collection planned for later. If we skip *Eye of Terror* (1999), a franchise work, it's been almost 15 years since your previous published novel. What happened in between?

BJB: Is it really 15 years? That's embarrassing. I'm not sure how much it was due to external circumstances or to inner inability to adapt. I just remember that I couldn't seem to place proposals for novels any more, and it was my practice not to write a novel I didn't have a contract for. The two novels aren't really new. They were among the proposals I couldn't place earlier.

JL: You recently acquired a computer and got on the internet. Has it so far proven useful or just time-consuming?

BJB: Time-consuming, hence I haven't spent any time on the net yet. The main difference so far is that my correspondence, previously organized into files, is in disarray.

JL: What about publishing? Wildside Press/Cosmos Books is reprinting your complete back catalogue as print-on-demand. What kind of an experience has it been so far?

BJB: We still have to see if any of it sells! Ask me in a year's time. Though having everything in print will be good in itself. When people ask me about my books I can now tell them to go online and buy them.

JL: Among the first four reprints is your collection *The Knights of the Limits* which has attained something of an underground classic status, but it has been unavailable for a long time and is commanding ridiculous prices on the used book market. I was wondering if you have any specific recollections about the conception of these stories?

BJB: Except for "All the King's Men," which was written in the 1950s, these stories were written from the late 1960s to the 1970s and aimed for the smoothness of execution typical of a type of science fiction I particularly admired. Contrarily the story I regarded as least successful in that regard, "Overload," is the one to have been singled out most in newspaper reviews.

Although sometimes praised for originality, in fact I am a sedulous emulator. It pleased me when "The Exploration of Space" was placed next to Jorge Luis Borges' "The Library of Babel" in a Terry Carr anthology, the former owing something to the latter. During the 1960s Tom Disch was living in London and for a time occupied a rented room over mine, turning out his wonderful polished stories. Calling on him there one day, I made mention of Tolstoy's immense skill. "Yes," replied Tom, "he did everything the hardest way, and made it work." My God, I thought, I wouldn't even know

the difference. I tried to use Disch's "voice" and approach in "Me and My Antronoscope" and don't know how it might have turned out without that influence. (A late acknowledgment, Tom; hope you don't mind!)

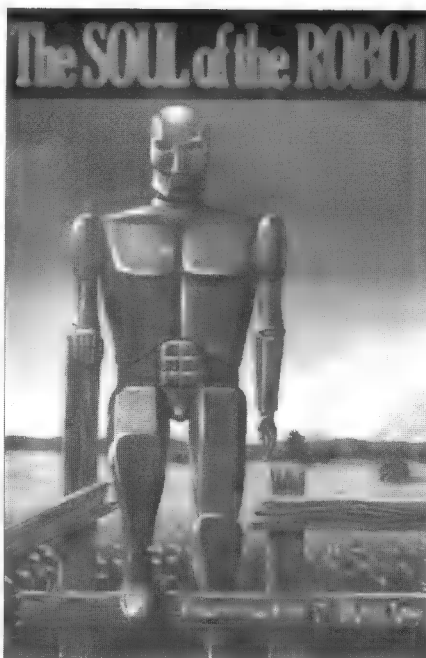
JL: Much as I love Disch's work, I never would have thought of the connection... any other anecdotes you remember?

BJB: Tom came to London with his close friend John Sladek. I think they had been living in Ibiza, where they had written their mainstream novel *Black Alice*. One minute's walk from where Tom and I were living was my favourite pub of all time, the Portland Arms. At that time I was writing my Jason Hyde serial, so I needed something gimmicky every week. One midday we were standing at the bar having a drink, when Tom started telling me about a fiction-writing course he had once been on. The students had been given the task of thinking up a deadly peril for a hero, and a means of escaping it. Tom had got the idea of having his hero encased in a metal tank filled with water which instantly froze. As water expands on freezing, this burst the tank and the hero escaped. Taking my lack of response for denseness, Tom found himself having to explain why this was ludicrous, unaware that I was already working out how to use it in Jason Hyde (by having Hyde take a suspended animation pill ahead of being put into the tank, so that he would revive after the tank had burst and the ice had melted). The conversation moved on before I could ask Tom for permission to use his idea, so that he still doesn't know I eventually stole it from him!

JL: I'm curious; what kind of work was it writing for the juveniles? I've seen some episodes of "The Astounding Jason Hyde," "Bartok and the Brothers" and a short story called "Solo Flight," but there must be a great number of other pieces floating in limbo somewhere.

BJB: That work really is a young man's game. You're writing to get some money by the weekend. You have to be fresh, and to be able to come up with story ideas at the drop of a hat, then write them in a few hours and make them vivid to read. Then you have to carry on doing that, week after week. I wouldn't have been able to do it too long without burning out.

Most of the stories were 4,000 words, so there was no room for messing about. The story had to move. An editor once phoned me and started raving, saying he wouldn't have paid



me if he'd known I'd opened with a description of a moonscape over 200 words long!

You're not building up a literary property; everything you write vanishes, so you don't remember it. I don't remember "Solo Flight" (but then it's not certain I wrote it; it could have been Mike Moorcock). I can remember a few stories. One in an annual was called "Tunnel to the Moon," I think. It was about a railway tunnel built from Earth to the moon.

JL: Now again, at least for a while, you were back at writing for the juvenile market. Games Workshop published your Warhammer tie-in novel, *The Eye of Terror* in 1999. Never one to have had much interest in franchise fiction, I was surprised by the amount of ideas and invention you wrapped into the novel. How do you feel about the book now, when compared to your original work?

BJB: Games Workshop's "Warhammer 40,000" universe is not something to take lightly. It's been worked and reworked and its background and history are minutely detailed. While of course it borrows from the whole of sf and fantasy, it is impressive. I also like it for its unadulterated grimness. All that's horrible about the 20th century – the murderous authoritarianism, the ruthless racism – are there but are necessary. Humanity would perish without them.

So from a writer's point of view, a lot of labour is involved before you can even start, and getting an authentic feeling for 40K is not something a lot of people can do, I would guess. I approached the book the same way I

would any other, by being as inventive as I could within the discipline of the work. (Incidentally you could be mistaking some of the background material as being original to me.) Remember, too, that some of the juvenile work I did in the '60s involved "house" characters and backgrounds, so it is not altogether a new thing for me.

You asked me for a drinking story once. Here's another one, of sorts. I first got involved with GW ten or 12 years ago, when they first tried their hand at fiction publishing. I turned in a few stories on spec, and games-masters Rick Priestley and Bryan Ansell asked me to visit them in Nottingham, where they have their studio. I was being "handled" by a pleasant young woman called Lindsey, who said she would meet me at the railway station, that I would recognize her because she wore black leather and metal and stuff, and she would show me to the pub. These guys must be okay to do business with, I thought. They spend their lunchtimes in the pub. After she and I had been there for a while, and I had swallowed several pints of beer (as usual I had eaten nothing all day), I said, "When are the others coming?" "Oh, the others aren't coming here," Lindsey said. "It's just that I heard you like to drink."

That was when I decided I had made a mistake. We repaired to the studio and Lindsey ushered me into a boardroom to talk with Priestley and Ansell, who turned out to be sober, serious and business-like. Trying, unsuccessfully I believe, not to appear half-smashed, I told them that the really good story potential in 40K lay with the Tyranid and the Eldar. They

looked surprised and said they'd like it if I could write around either of those.

The Tyranid are the old sf giant impenetrable, who roam from galaxy to galaxy dismantling everything in their path. Eldar are sf interstellar elves who live longer than humans and whose experience and mental life are faster and more intense. When I was writing stories for *Inferno!* I asked Andy Jones why he hadn't commissioned one particular story proposal, "Hive Fleet Horror," in which I would try to glimpse into Tyranid mentality and also fill what I thought was a gap in the 40K bible: why the Tyranid behave as they do. "Well," Andy said, "I can't see how you could make it work." So I offered to do it on spec, and of course, he used it.

Among the unresponded-to proposals I last submitted was a series of stories with an Eldar as central character.

JL: I know you were all set to get started on the sequel, *Age of Adventure*, which they even announced for a late 2001 publication, but nothing came of it. Did you ever find out what happened and do you have any thoughts about that particular publishing venture?

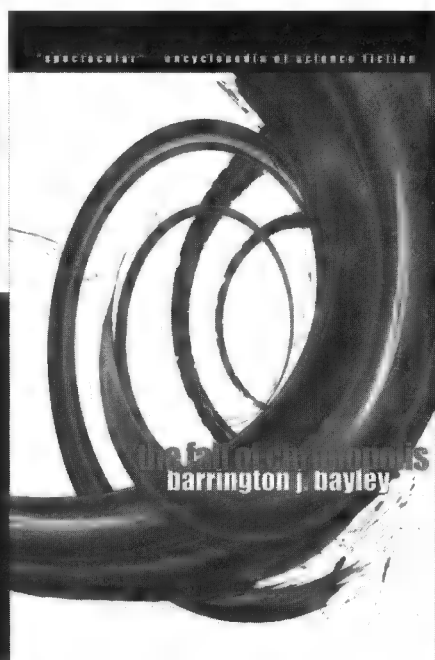
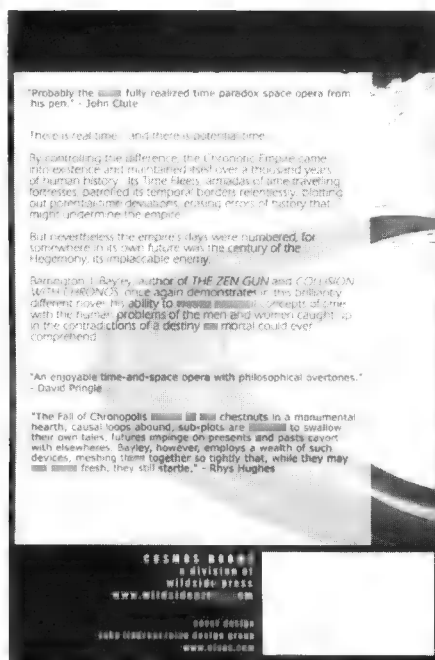
BJB: I've just been ignored. I expect it's simply due to what I've come up against a couple of times before: a change of editor. In the publishing world, a new captain throws some of the old crew into the sea, and some passengers as well.

JL: The last two or three years have seen a lot of new material appearing. You've had four stories in *Interzone*, one in *Spectrum SF*, sporadic short pieces for *Inferno!* as well as the 100,000-word *Eye of Terror*. Any comments?

BJB: Apart from the Games Workshop novel, that's not really a lot of work; it only looks that way because I started submitting to *Interzone* again. I suddenly stopped writing fiction – in the middle of a story late last year and have spent the time on a long-delayed project, a book on the Tarot. I've just finished the first draft, and although it's not very long (about 50,000 words) it's ideas-dense. The work was more in ordering the material than in writing it.

JL: You previously mentioned that the Tarot book touches on issues you've tackled in your fiction, as for example the idea of a cyclic universe...

BJB: The doctrine of an eternally recurring universe in which nothing



ever changes was taught by the Stoics (which I call "Colonnaders" in *The Pillars of Eternity*), but they got it from the earlier Pythagoreans. Compare that with the Zoroastrian doctrine, in which the world also follows a cycle in time, but one in which a great conflict takes place, and after only one pass through the cycle the world is transformed into a completely different state.

In my discussions on the Tarot I make the suggestion that these two ideas may be separated aspects of a stranger doctrine almost impossible to comprehend, but which is incorporated in the Tarot. In this, the world which we experience is an essay which either has failed to attain or is yet to attain its intention. If it can be attained, then it is only on the scale of cosmical recurrence (which transcends time) in which, however, some sort of gradual change can take place. The struggle of human consciousness to "realize itself" is a small part of this process.

Of course, one cannot be confident that the Tarot is anything more than an arbitrary collection of images, but nevertheless the symbols are there and they can be read in this way, if you pay attention to detail.

JL: Do you think putting science-fictional ideas into a non-fictional context would be a more profitable venue these days?

BJB: That's been going on in the form of futurology books for some time, but it's not something I wish to spend my time on. The Tarot book is mystical philosophy, not sf.

JL: Like the Tarot book, and at least *The Rod of Light*, your new novel *The Sinners of Erspia* applies the Zoroastrian doctrines to the storyline. Noting your recurring interest in the subject I wonder if you have any personal feelings or beliefs attached, or is it just grist for the mill?

BJB: I don't have personal religious or philosophical beliefs, though you could say I have gradations of nonbelief, if that makes any sense. Thought is a tool, applied to the human environment. It gets mistaken, of course, for the environment itself. Zoroastrian doctrine is notable for its dramatic character, and its colourfulness renders it suitable for fictional use. Mike Moorcock used it before I did, in one of his early fantasies, set at the time of Alexander's invasion of Persia. If I remember right, he had Alexander possessed by Ahriman.

J. G. Bennett, a writer who made a study of such things, says the kernel of Zoroastrianism is that it expresses

the role of hazard in life. Its adherents referred to it as "the good religion." Certainly what it did was fully accept the existence of evil as an objective force, and an opposing force for good. Scholars have suggested this was because the religion was formulated in a settled farming society being periodically ravaged by nomadic raiders from the north, and the contrast between good and bad was stark.

Zoroastrianism must have influenced Gnosticism, with which I probably feel most affinity, and this rebounded in the revision of Zoroastrianism known as Manichaeism, in which matter itself is the realm of the evil god. It's this version which became known in Europe in medieval times. The mage in *The Rod of Light*, though I call him a Zoroastrian, is really a Manichaean.

The struggle between good and evil is, of course, one of the core themes of literature, as well as the most troublesome problem of religion. My favourite film of all time is *The Night of the Hunter*, where two children are being pursued by a psychopathic murderer played by Robert Mitchum, which makes this moral statement: the world consists not of good and evil, but of evil and innocence, which is therefore helpless. All the "good" people who might have helped the children are either too stupid to do so, or too weak. Only evil is strong and clever. Eventually, of course, the children find a protector who is both good and strong, but the film is following Hollywood conventions by then, and the storyline has departed from the theme.

JL: You've mentioned *The Sinners of*

Erspia being a homage of sorts to Philip José Farmer. Could you elaborate on that a bit?

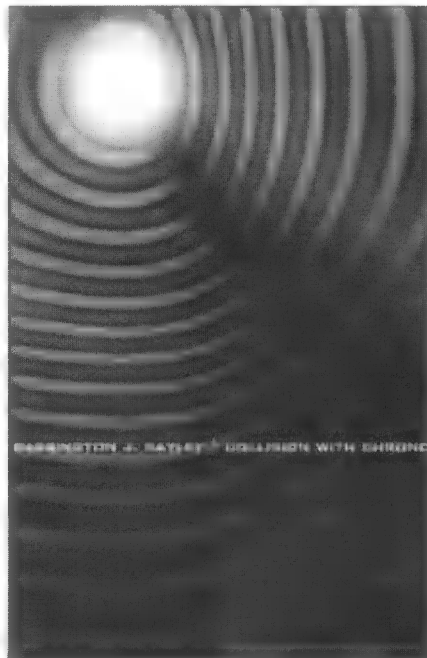
BJB: Not a homage to Farmer, exactly, it's simply that I'm more imitative than some people think. In some of my novels I've had a role model in mind. *Garments of Caeon* and *Pillars of Eternity* were Jack Vance. *The Grand Wheel* was Philip Dick. *Sinners of Erspia* was Farmer. I'll be very happy if the influence shows. My friend David Maverick surprised me by saying the novel reminded him of *A Voyage to Arcturus*, that I'd loaned him recently, but I don't think it could seriously be compared with David Lindsay's tour de force. He also pointed out that *Erspia* is an anagram of Persia, the home of Zoroastrianism, but that was unintentional.

JL: Besides Farmer, I felt a close companionship to Ian Watson's *The Gardens of Delight* in its vivid, hallucinatory imagery; decadent and bizarre yet embedded in the fertile doctrines of science fiction. Could you tell me a bit about the process of writing the novel, its origins and inspirations that brought you to the final form?

BJB: This question brings out the natterer in me! Both *The Sinners of Erspia* and *Collision with Chronos* began life the same way, and at about the same time: as novelettes, which when finished were obviously inadequate to stand alone, and could only work as the first sections of novels. This (the first chapter of the eventual novel) was conceived as a parody of human susceptibility to suggestion, employing an artificial travesty of the Zoroastrian idea.

It was my practice to obtain a contract to spur me into the labour of finishing a novel, and that involved producing a synopsis of the whole, either brief or detailed, which meant I always knew where I was going. No one took up *Erspia*. Years later, when I became convinced no one would ever publish a book of mine again, it occurred to me that I never had been able to think up a satisfactory outline for it. I decided, for my own satisfaction, to do for the first time what some writers say is the only way to write: simply carry on, and see where the book takes itself. As the form is episodic, moving from one experimental planetoid to another, that wasn't very hard. I was quite pleased with the result, though as I say, I hadn't expected to see it published, so I suppose I was fairly relaxed about the whole thing.

I'm pleased and surprised at the comparison, as I think Ian Watson's



In Defence of Originality

The Gardens of Delight is absolutely extraordinary. But *Erspia* is in no way an imitation. At least a third of it was written long before *GoD*'s appearance. I got the idea for the weather-mapped *Erspia*-4 on a train journey through England's Lake District while it was undergoing moody changeable weather.

JL: At 70,000 words *The Sinners of Erspia* is a fairly short novel by today's gargantuan standards, but your other new book *The Great Hydra-tion* is significantly shorter; vivid, fast paced and entertaining – reading very much like half of an Ace Double. Was this intentional?

BJB: That's exactly what I was aiming at. The novel is probably more typical of 1950s science fiction. I think I wrote the opening scenes at the world market, and the attempts to sell the new invention of radio for new weapons, in my mid-teens. I envisaged it then as an adventure story on an alien planet with no human beings present.

JL: How do you feel about the end result, and why has it taken so long for it to reach its final form?

BJB: Don Wollheim rejected my proposal for the novel in 1979 mainly because it had no heroes. I finished it a couple of years ago for my own satisfaction.

It deals with a firm of interstellar explorer-exploiters, run by partners Karl Krabbe and Boris Bouche. Their staff are all in a form of legalized slavery, that is, voluntary servitude. The unheroic protagonist is one of their bondmen, a nuclear engineer who has tried to renounce his bond but been prevented from doing so by typical chicanery on the part of the cynical partners. As the story opens the firm has discovered a small desert planet which in a previous age has borne oceans. Its intelligent species had been crustacean-like, living along the extensive shorelines. Then, due to some biological freak, all the water drained away into a deep aquifer, leaving a waterless world. The crustaceans have managed to survive, hoarding what water remains in domed refuges. To help them they have aided the evolution of countless tribes of humanoid and lizardlike creatures whose bodies contain no water and no circulating blood – the dehydrates – who live in constant warfare with one another but have an ingrained subservience to the crustaceans. The firm of Krabbe & Bouche realizes that with some adroit geologi-

cal engineering the planet can be given back its oceans. Even though this will mean the extermination of the dehydrates, to whom water is poison, they strike a deal with the crustaceans... did I mention that K&B are operating illegally, having already had their license revoked?

I guess it's a minor piece of work, but fun to write. In my mind it also has echoes of Phil Dick's *Solar Lottery*.

JL: You have a great affinity to villains, gangsters and various other lowlifes in your work. Krabbe & Bouche certainly fit well into that tradition.

BJB: It's been my complaint that in many films etc the villains (gangsters or whatever) often show more initiative, resolve and courage than anyone else and yet always lose.

If Wollheim had taken the novel, I probably would have written follow-ups as he suggested. In fact, the next was to have been *The Death of the Technobody*, in which K&B stumble on a planet whose intelligent species has been wiped out by a virus some time before. Its scientists had managed only to preserve the brain of an infant, and created a cybernetic system – the technobody – to service and educate it. However the system is degrading with time. It is having to resort to ever less advanced technologies and has now proliferated across the planet as a huge industrial complex, leading to such anomalies as a coal-fired steam railway network manned by robots. There is also a disastrous rate of

industrial accidents. The technobody is close to collapse. K&B, of course, are trying to locate the beneficiary brain so as to do a deal...

JL: What are your feelings on genre science fiction and its place today? Do you think there is enough room and interest for this kind of adventure sf, or is it a thing of the past?

BJB: I have had a feeling for quite a long time that sf in its full glory is essentially a 20th-century phenomenon. When I was young it was not understood by the general public. People who took a special interest in it were thought of as "odd" and were derided. Even now it is looked on with contempt by people who think of themselves as "literary."

Now, though, the science-fiction vocabulary has overtaken public consciousness. Cinema and television are stuffed full of it. TV commercials have adopted it. So it's become public property, so to speak, as the role of technology – particularly space technology – has expanded in ordinary life. It's hard to say how the genre will develop in the 21st century. Already it's leaking at the edges. It may become a different kind of intellectual exercise. As for myself, perhaps I'm stuck in the past somewhat! We shall see.

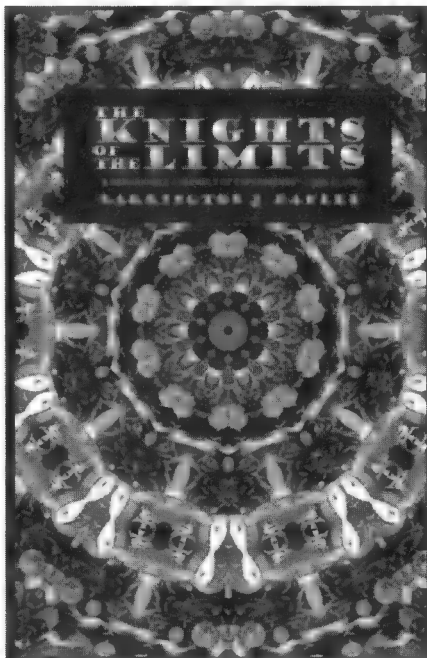
In Britain at any rate, the schism between science and "art" (for which read literature) still exists. Most authors know no science and are virtually unaware that the real world is the one science describes. It's a failure of the imagination. Recently I listened to a radio programme on the subject of novelists who put science into their work. Such practitioners seemed few. Science fiction was not mentioned once.

A few years ago I was talking to Ken Bulmer, who belongs to an even older generation of fans than myself. He told me that he and fellow fans once used to hold discussions on how to publicize sf, i.e. make people more aware of it and more appreciative. I was bemused by this. One of its attractions for me was that it was opaque to the everyday average moron!

But yes, there will always be a place for science adventure fiction.

JL: During the past months, you've been compiling a new short-story collection and working on the Tarot book. What lies in the future after these two projects?

BJB: More stories and more novels! Essentially I'll just carry on, until death intervenes.



Vita Brevis Ars Longa

Julian West

The Irish Museum of Modern Art is approached down a long, straight avenue entered via an impressive gatehouse. When I drove up to it, I found it closed, with a small crowd of protesters waving their banners on the pavement outside. The messages were familiar – “Murder, not Art,” “What about the victims?” and a smirking student with “John 7:11.” A scruffy middle-aged man with bad OrGSM allergy scarring had a “Shut Sellafield again” T-shirt. I turned left to negotiate a narrow lane that led to the back entrance, which was less imposing but followed a more interesting route by an ornamental garden. A small queue waited to buy advance tickets. They were as mixed as the protesters: some teenagers with the latest tufting and nipflash fashions, some in burqas; and a middle-aged woman who could have been the sister of the man at the gate.

The man I was to meet was still the most famous figure in the world of the arts – and still, after all these years, the most controversial. To some he was an inspiring figure who had created and mastered a new form of art; to others he was a charlatan, even a brutal thug. His works were disturbing and challenging, and impossible to characterize. His name was Carl Fleiss.

Though Fleiss had been a major figure for many years, this was the first authorized retrospective exhibit. Partly this was due to the nature of the work. Each work was a performance, and Fleiss had always insisted that the photographic record should not be confused with the work itself. He had produced many books and articles,

but these fell into the realm of art criticism rather than art, though they mainly involved his discussion and analysis of his own work. He had spent several years preparing this display of his work, hinting that there was a surprise in store for tomorrow’s opening. I was to interview Fleiss at two o’clock. Until then, I planned to see what he had made of his career thus far.

I began by listening to an interview with Fleiss’s most severe critic, Ronald F. The interview covered familiar ground – F’s criticisms of Fleiss were almost as well known as the works themselves. The tone was measured, but the verdict devastating. “I disassociate myself totally from those who would ban Fleiss, or prevent him from working on spurious moral grounds. My quarrel with Fleiss is very different. I find his work vulgar and meretricious. His fundamental flaw is that he lacks the control to impose his own vision. He allows the random behaviour of his subjects to produce his little effects. He claims to be the first artist to involve real life. Hey, I’ve got news for you, Carl – real life has been going on for a long time now; just putting up a frame and a label doesn’t make it art.”

I switched off the disc and walked to the gallery entrance. The exhibit had been given the entire first floor of the Museum’s main building. It was a hollow square, with galleries opening off a single corridor. The theme was simple – a chronological record of his work, each room containing photographs, video, sounds, and even

some of the materials used.

The first room was disconcertingly atypical. It was a selection of Fleiss's early paintings. In a break with the chronological rule, he had included a selection of his later work. All the paintings were portraits, many of children. All are sympathetic, touching, filled with empathy. Someone unfamiliar with Fleiss's work would have been shocked when entering the next room. Even after all these years, I was shocked in spite of myself.

There are some who say that *What Are You Worth to Society?* is Fleiss's greatest work, and that nothing he did afterwards compared to it. The first photographs show the pinstriped stockbroker and the tramp – almost different species. This is the only work which Fleiss photographed himself, and the care is obvious. The photographs follow the two men over the course of a normal day. Finally the stockbroker drops a coin in the beggar's hat as he heads home to his family. The last photograph shows the two men lying on the street together, suddenly equal. Their blood is the same colour, after all.

The next room dealt with the aftermath, shown in newspaper headlines, news programmes and interviews. Fleiss was arrested on the spot, and tried within two months. His defence was based entirely on the AAFA. The famous quote from the judge was shown on a continuous loop – "Artistic freedom does not extend to criminal activity." Next to it was the judgement by the European Court of Human Rights – "The Absolute Artistic Freedom Amendment places no limit on artistic freedom. The right to pursue an artistic vision is fundamental to a free society."

I won't describe in detail the rest of the exhibition, except to say that everything was represented. *No, Please...*, *Oh God Where is She?*, *Still Life With Ferrari and Uzi*, and *An End to Pain* were all there. From *I Am Not Under Arrest*^(R) onward, Fleiss had an exclusive contract with BIBTVC7 to document and broadcast his work. Personally I preferred the reportage of the earlier pieces, but the immersive video of the BIBTVC7 coverage was undoubtedly compelling.

I left the final room (last year's *Wait Till My Husband Gets Home*) exhausted but exhilarated. The effect was, surprisingly, far from depressing. Fleiss had made his bloody subject matter a tribute to human resilience. Either in their desperation to live or their acceptance of the inevitable, Fleiss's subjects earn our respect. Mrs Williams, the subject of *I'll Do Anything* is an iconic figure of our time – represented on T-shirts, album covers and even a Mrs Williams Day in her native Ecuador. Would her life have had such meaning to so many people but for Fleiss?

I walked for a few minutes in the courtyard, which was empty apart from scaffolding erected on the roof of one of the galleries. There was a small platform with a rope attached to it. Otherwise everything was left bare, allowing me to gather my thoughts before my first appointment.

Mandy Quest had managed Fleiss's affairs for many

years. She was devoted, efficient and totally committed to his work. I had arranged to speak to her briefly to gain an insight into how Fleiss was marketed and presented to the world. We met in the small office that IMMA had given her for the duration of the exhibit. She was an attractive, buxom woman in her mid-40s, conservatively but expensively dressed – and obviously devoted to Fleiss.

She began by denying that she had anything interesting to say. "I'm not an art critic, I'm not an artist. I admire what Curt does tremendously, but I can't speak for his intentions. My job is to make life easier for him – book air tickets and hotels, handle the press, and arrange security, which is always going to be a problem." I asked how serious the threats to Fleiss's safety had to be taken. "Oh, very seriously. There was somebody with a gun tried to get into the hotel in Vienna – a cousin of one of the subjects, I think. The police are never any help. Sometimes I think that they would be happy to see Carl just go away, as if he were the criminal."

What did she think of the anti-Fleiss protesters? "They are really, really disgusting people. This is me, not Carl, now, but I just hate them. They are just using Carl as a way to get publicity for their own agenda. They are trying to impose their warped fundamentalist ideas on the rest of us."

What about the subjects' relatives? "Well, did you ever meet Arthur Williams? All he is interested in is getting money out of Carl. According to him, his wife was a collaborator on *I'll Do Anything* and her estate deserves royalties. That silly South American housewife, a collaborator with the most important artist of the century! Actually he has already become rich thanks to Carl, drivelling on chat shows about how his life was ruined. And that stupid book, what was it? *Martyr to His Art*. Honestly!"

Presumably there were no royalties anyway? "No, that's absolutely true. Carl has a deal with BIBTVC7 to document what he is doing, but the works themselves don't make money. We can't charge admission! Carl earns his living as a critic of Carl Fleiss, basically."

Did she enjoy what she did? "Oh, it is a privilege. A joy. Carl is so wonderful, and the feeling that you are helping with something important... it's changed my life."

And Carl himself? As a person? "Carl is so good. So good. He always appreciates everything people do for him. I mean, I get paid for it, it's my job, but he always says something. And the things people say about him! Well, you're going to meet him now, you'll see. He is sweet, really. A lovely, lovely man."

As I walked to greet Fleiss, I could see what she meant. He was a jolly, friendly man, with an untidy red beard and long, matted hair. He was wearing a well-patched tweed jacket with a thick wool tie. He clapped me on the shoulder and ushered me to a seat at a table on the edge of the interior courtyard. "So, you've come to see the monster! The most hated man in Europe!" He held his hands up to the side of his face and wriggled the fingers in mock menace. "Well, I wish I could just meet all the people

prepared to judge me face to face. Let them tell me that I'm a cold-hearted villain, eh?" He sat down and stretched, yawning broadly. "Well, what do you want to know? Any questions that have been asked before a hundred times?"

I leant forward, elbows on my knees. I was overwhelmed for a second by the sheer presence of the man. I took a deep breath and began: "I spoke to Ms Quest about the protesters that follow you around the world. What do you think their agenda is?"

"Ah. Yes. Good question." He leant back and smiled narrowly. "Some of them have a genuine belief that what I do is wrong. Some kind of religious indoctrination, faith, whatever you want to call it. I don't mock it, but I refuse to accept that they have any right to impose their religious or political views on me."

"What about the subjects' relatives?"

"I have great respect for the people who grieve quietly, or who are able to celebrate the subject's contribution. I despise the people who try to make what may well be a sad event into a chance to make a name for themselves. Those awful books they write!" He shook his head ruefully.

"Was the AAFA an inspiration to your work? I mean, did you realize what options it opened for new forms of art?"

"At first I had no idea. It seemed quite an innocuous thing – free speech and all that, just a proclamation of values. It was Lim's work that showed me the possibilities. When *Deconstructing David* was shown to be protected under the act, I realized what might be possible."

"Even though Lim was operating in art galleries with other people's art – very different to what you do?"

"Oh, Lim himself had no influence whatsoever. Clumsy, attention-seeking stuff. Frankly vulgar. It was his legal status that inspired me. I realized that art is always permitted."

"But if you were wrong, you opened yourself to terrible consequences."

"I admit that I was quite scared. I have to admit that one reason *What Are You Worth?* is so thoroughly planned is that I was waiting for someone else to test the waters. I couldn't believe that I was the only one who could see the possibilities of this new artform. But I was. In the end, I realized that if I didn't do it, nobody would. Or someone would do it in a year or two and make a mess of it."

"And what was it like to actually carry out the actions?"

"It was just a matter of finishing up. The work was done – I just had to complete it. And I slept just fine that night, which is something else you people always ask me, even if it was in prison."

"When you were convicted, did you think that it had all gone wrong?"

"No, it was obvious that the judge was clutching at straws. My legal team had won the argument. The appeal was a formality."

He leaned forward and started talking more rapidly and intensely. "I saw those people on the street – not the

two in *What Are You Worth?* but people just like them. I wanted to do something to express the absurdity that these two people were regarded so differently. I considered everything – painting, photography, even journalism. Then I realized that there is just one time where everyone is the same. I couldn't believe that nobody else had thought of it. With my other work, the paintings, the photographs, writing, the medium was always an obstacle to my ideas. When I realized that I had found my voice, I felt so free. I could put down the pen and the brush, and take up the tools that I was born for."

"Did you have to learn a new set of techniques?"

"Well, I don't approve of conscription, but in my case it paid off. I thought that I was being bullied by fascists and all the time I was in Art College."

"Will you ever be able to work in the USA?"

He smiled. "I doubt it. The Supreme Court have refused to support artistic freedom, and I don't think that the Martin Amendment will ever be passed. Too many vested interests are getting it muddled up with sexual politics, racial politics..."

"President Clinton has condemned you on several occasions."

"Funny, when I hear that I always think of Hillary. Chelsea started to get at me when I spoke out against WACI and the bombing of Scotland. She has no worthwhile opinions on art."

"She complained about your representation of ethnic minorities."

"I've been condemned for featuring ethnic minorities, and for not featuring them. I think *Sisters Under the Skin* expressed what I feel."

"You have inspired a number of young artists. What do you think of them?"

Fleiss sighed and shook his head. "One hates to be unkind." He smiled. "I should be flattered to have my own work fed back to me, but I would like to see more originality."

"What about the large-scale works of Yonson, such as *Untitled 6 (Buenos Aires)*?"

"It's a large-scale application of small-scale ideas. What does it say? Where is the focus? There is too much going on. Whenever I plan a new work, the difficult thing is to exclude extraneous detail. Does Yonson plan anything? I don't see any applied intelligence, or spirit, or wit, for God's sake!"

"How do you see the future developing?"

"For me or for art? Art will go on, and someone will eventually transcend what I do and improve upon it. So far, nobody has; at least, that's my opinion. And I have just one more work to complete."

"Only one? What then, retirement?"

"You could say that. I have no second career in mind."

For a moment I sat silently, unable to come to terms with this sudden revelation. I was about to continue when Fleiss stood up. "I have a few things to do. It was fun talking to you." I shook hands mechanically, and Fleiss strode off. I sat down to gather my thoughts. I had no idea how I should present Fleiss's retirement. It would

be a massive story worldwide. Did I have the right to tell anyone? If not, why did he tell me? He said nothing about it being in confidence.

I would have to report this final revelation, but I owed it to Fleiss to tell him of my intentions. Fleiss had gone, but Mandy Quest would still be in her office. I bundled up my notes and went to talk to her. I tapped lightly on her door but there was no answer. I knocked again, louder, but there was still no response. I gently pushed the door, which swung open.

Mandy Quest lay face-sideways on her desk. Her face was battered almost beyond recognition. On the floor someone had written *I'll Burn My Books* in her blood, using a fingertip. I felt a mixture of horror and exhilaration. I had no doubt that this was Fleiss's work. I could form no critical or moral opinion on it. Should I be calling the police and ambulance, or should I be taking notes? I knew I shouldn't touch anything – but was it to avoid contaminating evidence, or spoiling a masterpiece?

The composition was masterful, and I will always be grateful that I had the opportunity to see a Fleiss first-hand. Every detail was perfectly worked out, from the bruising on Mandy's throat to the broken paperweight on the floor. It was threatening, yet tender, brutal but loving. Fleiss, at his best, can encapsulate the human condition, and make us feel the extremes of what humanity can do and be.

I knew that I would never have such a chance again, and I stood silently observing for nearly half an hour. I

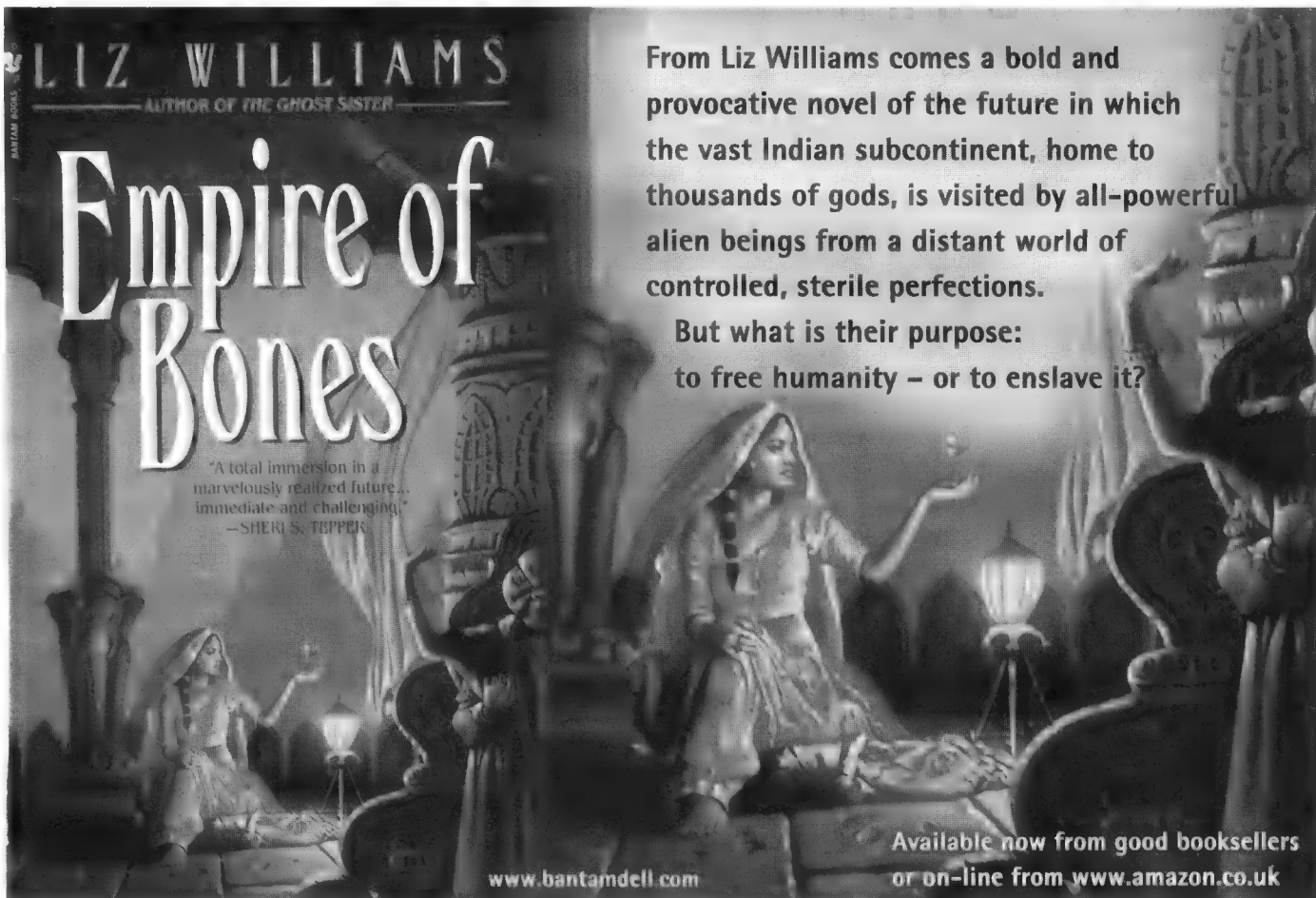
cannot say that I wasted a second, and yet I still feel a sense of loss at being unable to recall the full terror and beauty of the moment. Eventually, I realized that the next stage had to be achieved – and that I was Fleiss's instrument. I closed the door gently on the scene, resigned to sharing my own special performance with the rest of the world.

The courtyard was by now full of the people who had been queuing patiently while I interviewed Fleiss. I saw that they were looking up expectantly at the platform on the clock tower. Fleiss was standing on the very edge of the platform, absolutely still. Then he took a single step and fell. The rope caught him a few feet above the ground, but his neck did not break.

The applause continued long after he had stopped kicking.

"Fleiss" is on show at IMMA until 17th December. Adults E\$15, Under-16s, Students and Senior Citizens E\$7.50. Special rates for tours: contact box office.

Julian West is winner of this year's James White Award for best short story, and the above is his winning entry (and his first published story). He lives in Dublin, where he works as ■ software consultant. He comments: "Julian West is my real name – but as it is also the name of the protagonist of Edward Bellamy's utopian sf novel *Looking Backward* (1888) I am thinking of making it my pseudonym as well."



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The Happy Gang

Neil Williamson

Well then, Doctor. I see you have found me at last, here in my refuge. I'm able to walk further every day, but I suppose I should have known there is no outrunning you and your forms. Isn't this a beautiful corner of the village? So peaceful? No?

No, I can see you have more insistent priorities this afternoon than the simple pleasures of an apple orchard.

You want me to tell it again, don't you? You want me to change my story, give you something you can put in a report. You want me to say it didn't happen. To be honest there are times when I'm not even sure myself any more. That's what you want to hear, isn't it? That's your ticket to send me back. My return to sanity, my admission that I'm scared to go back.

Well, I am. I'm terrified.

That's how I know *he's* dead. The Captain.

But what does any of this matter. Crazy or sane, it's immaterial, isn't it? If I can walk and carry a gun your report will be signed and stamped, and I'll be sent back regardless.

Very well, Doctor. I'll tell it again, but it'll cost you a couple of your wonderful pills. You know I'm convinced they are a weaker dose. I can feel the shakes beginning and it has barely been two hours since my breakfast dose. Let me know if I miss out any of your favourite parts.

You know how I came to be in France, of course. I had been in the thick of it since the spring of 1916, serving at the front line as an MO with the Third Lancs. Then my father got wind of what was about to happen that summer, and he pulled strings, first getting me trans-

ferred to a field hospital behind the lines, then removing me further from danger with my attachment to the Surgeon General at GHQ. He would have had me back home completely if he could, but even Lord Hawthorne couldn't manage that. Still I suppose he did his best to keep me out of it, and having seen what I have seen it is no cowardice for me to say that I am thankful. Nineteen-sixteen was close to being the single most frightening time of my life. Close, but not quite.

By March of this year, it was obvious that the campaign along the Somme was going badly. Christmas had come and gone, and both sides had dug in for the long haul. GHQ decided a morale-boosting tour of the trenches was in order. The party was to be fronted by General Atkinson. They could hardly have chosen a less sympathetic man for the job. I was co-opted as an adjutant but my main function was to report back to the Surgeon General's office on the status of our medical facilities.

On the morning of the 17th of March 1917 we drove down from Amiens. Our first stop was the casualty clearing station at Albert – a school house turned into a miniature hell. The officers presented their usual bluff encouragement, but I could tell that one or two of our small party were shaken by what they saw. Every bed was full, and the spaces between the beds were occupied by pallets on the floor. Every one of those was full as well. There were bodies everywhere. Men awaiting surgery to save, or more likely remove, recently blasted limbs, plug body cavity wounds, patch broken heads, before being loaded onto the hospital train to Amiens or Paris. For some, surgery had not come quickly enough: their wounds were bulbous with stinking, gangrenous blisters.

I had to hand it to those boys. They did a fine job of keeping a respectful silence. Only muted whimpers bore evidence of their suffering, and there was not a glimmer of disrespect for their superiors, the men who had led them to this. If the trench newspapers were to be believed, there was an attitude of derision spreading through our lines faster than lice, but there was no evidence of it here. Instead there were salutes and handshakes, brave smiles, the occasional cheerful joke. Good lads, all of them.

As we left the hospital we passed a young corporal sitting in the shade of the building, his knees up to his chest, arms folded around them. When he showed no sign of acknowledging our party there was a moment of awkwardness during which the officers bristled uncertainly, caught between the omission of the customary show of respect and the fact that there was obviously something amiss with the man.

"What's this fellow's trouble?" growled General Atkinson, eyeing suspiciously the soldier, who had started to rock gently to and fro.

"Shell shock, sir," advised the medic assigned to us for the visit. "It's unlikely he's even aware of your presence."

"Shell shock," Atkinson repeated as if trying the phrase out for the first time. It was still a new term then – it came with the new style of warfare, the big guns – although I've heard it used often since. You are fond of it yourself, Doctor.

Atkinson's face pursed sourly, as if the words tasted to him of cowardice. One good look into the soldier's eyes could have told him it was no such thing – they were focused elsewhere entirely. A place from where there was little likelihood of return.

It is not a place I have seen, Doctor. Your theories are wrong. I don't know how, but somehow my nerves remain intact. As I've told you, what happened to me was far more cruel.

Our tour took us from Albert to the trenches themselves. At every port of call we were struck by the men's marvellous determination to prevail no matter what. You could almost have taken these soldiers for regulars, instead of the barely trained bunch of conscripts that they were: bankers, butchers and brewers, men my father's age standing alongside youths yet to have their first shave, clusters of school friends, entire sports societies transplanted from their Oxbridge clubs. All of them ice-numbed, glass-eyed and a world away from their former lives; the military rigidity and that thin veneer of darkly cheerful stoicism, all that kept them waking sane every morning. The officers contented themselves with that veneer but I knew better. I had been, albeit briefly before my fortunate re-posting, where these men were now.

Our tour was not limited solely to the British troops. On occasion we were greeted warmly by the Canadians, and civilly by the embittered Anzacs. It became a routine, almost like a game: the General's bluff parried back by the troop's own with tight obedience and gritty humour. Then, at the umpteenth dug-out of the morning, a pit-propped hole in the ground housing a handful of men

lined up stiff-at-attention for inspection, a boy stumbled down the stairs nursing a bloody hand. Looking back, I have recognized this as one of those moments when the tide of events meets the current of your life at the exact point of maximum interference, and the turbulence throws you off course entirely. If we had left five minutes earlier, I would have been back in the car with the rest of them when the shelling started.

As it was, this white-faced boy's arrival was to blow my life apart as violently as any shell. He stood dripping blood onto the lowest wooden step, caught between his distress and the awareness that he had interrupted a senior officer. The General and the rest of us stared back at him.

"One of your men, Sergeant?" Atkinson asked.

"Private Willis, Sir. Currently on sentry duty," the little Geordie sergeant replied sourly.

"Better get a replacement up there, then. We can't drop our vigilance for a moment, now can we?" Atkinson said this without taking his eyes off the lad. The boy looked as if he might faint.

"Yes, Sir," the sergeant said, and with jilt of his head spurred one of the others into motion up the stairs. Willis had to come fully into the dug-out to let him pass.

"That's a clumsy wound you have there, boy." The way Atkinson said *clumsy* was as if to say that he found difficulty in imagining that anyone could be so hamfisted. "How'd you come by it?" he asked.

"A piece of shell casing, Sir," Willis whimpered. "It was hidden in the mud."

The General mused for a moment. Then he said, "Still," and there was a sharpness in that word like the unsheathing of his regimental sword. It sliced the air between them with military unequivocation. "Still," he repeated himself, "a trip to the field hospital's probably in order, don't you think? A short rest up there and you'll be as right as rain. I expect, eh?"

Willis nodded uncertainly, puzzled by the officer's tone but exhibiting too obvious relief at his words. The sergeant reacted quickly. "Lambert," he addressed another of his men, "Make sure Willis gets to the field hospital..."

"No need, Sergeant," Atkinson cut in. "Hawthorne here has all the necessary skills." I swear that was the first time during that entire trip he had as much as acknowledged my presence – and now it was to make me complicit in his tormenting of this young soldier.

Nevertheless, I deferred to his rank with a muted, "Sir," and looked at the wound.

Having had his fun, Atkinson decided that the tour was at an end. "Finish up quickly and join us back at the car," he said to me.

Suturing the boy's hand took longer than I'd first anticipated. The wound was not only deep but he had torn the webbing between the second and third fingers. To his credit, he made not a sound the whole time, except to say, "I never did it on purpose, Sir."

"Of course you didn't," I reassured, quietly noncommittal, although I couldn't blame him if he had. By the looks of him he was pretty well scared enough to do

something that drastic. As I finished off the stitches I wondered privately how long it would be before he turned up at the field hospital with a bullet in the foot.

What do I remember of those moments immediately after leaving that dug-out? I remember pausing for a second, trying to recall which direction to go in. I remember a stickling of fine rain on my brow, a sudden and out of place, fresh meadowy smell, and a faraway sound – a sound that did not become louder as such, but rather became increasingly *present* in my world. Then the detonation of the world, a chaos of sound, and a heavy rain of stinking wet earth that thudded down on top of my suddenly prone body. My first thought was of Willis and his comrades and, shamefully, how fortunate I had been to escape their fate of interment in the caved-in dug-out. Perhaps, however, there might be some hope if I could locate the spot where the entrance had been and dig quickly, but even as I regained my footing, a second shell exploded and sent me scurrying in the opposite direction, all thoughts of Willis and his comrades blasted away.

I zig-zagged haphazardly along the supply trenches between the lines as the earth flew into the sky and choking smoke billowed around me. I searched desperately for shelter, but nothing made sense to my eyes. Then I was almost tumbling down a set of dug-out stairs before I was aware that the entrance was there.

I stumbled down the stairs, confused and sickened, but what stopped me was the warm murmur of conversation – the intimate sounds of fireside company. So normal and welcoming a thing here amid the mud and smoke with the artillery pounding iron fists into the earth.

I descended cautiously, intrigued, and saw half a dozen soldiers in various poses of relaxation, apparently untroubled by the hellish re-landscaping undertaken by the Bosche shells only a few feet above them. Three of them clustered, laughing, around a letter. The central figure of the trio seemed somewhat embarrassed by what was written there, but apparently did not mind too much. A lover's letter, perhaps? On the bunk above them another stretched out lazily, reading a tatty book. Two more sat around a small table, playing cards. Barring the uniforms the scene could have been from a holiday chalet on a rainy afternoon in Skegness.

Outside a shell hit close by. The lamps swung wildly, little falls of dirt pattering from the ceiling. My heart clenched.

"Wooh! Getting a bit stormy," the men chorused, laughing again. The shock wave kicked me down the remaining steps.

"Oh, hello!" One of the card players, a gangly young man with a flopping blonde fringe rose from his game. He peered in my direction, and then reached up to stop the swinging lamp. "That's better," he grinned, "we can see you now. Name's Marten," he said, extending a hand. His handshake was firm and friendly. "Well, come in, please," he said. "Would you like some tea? There's a pot on. Should be just about ready. Right, Gordon?"

His gaming opponent pulled a battered timepiece from a tunic pocket. "To a tee," he said with a nod of satisfaction. Gordon was an older, tougher-looking man. There

was a rough burr to his voice that made me look instinctively at his insignia.

"Cameronians?" I asked.

"Spot on," Marten answered. His own accent was similar to my own, a teased-out product of the public school system, but there was possibly a hint of a Scottish lilt there now I was listening for it.

I was offered a bunk to sit on, which I did gratefully, and a hot enamel mug was pressed into my hands. I had not realized until that moment that I was trembling.

"So, what brings you round this neck of the woods in weather like this?" Marten said.

They listened politely while I introduced myself and told them what had happened to me that day. Afterwards, Marten introduced the lads, referring to them collectively as the Happy Gang – although he did not bother to explain the nickname. My trembling subsided as I began to enjoy the comfort of the dug-out's camaraderie. I found myself liking Marten's quick wit and infectious humour. However, when I mentioned General Atkinson's name there was a chorus of hoots and boos. While I knew the command was becoming increasingly unpopular with the rank and file, I was shocked by such open derision.

"Atkinson's not a favourite around here I take it?" I ventured.

Marten chuckled. "The man's a baboon. An ape, I tell you, and with no more military sense. His only *strategy* is to hold the line, keeping us sitting here, waiting to be blown to little bits. Men's lives are cheaper to him than artillery shells. He goes through them fast enough." There should have been rancour in Marten's tone as he said this, but he spoke as if he were discussing a disappointing cricket result. The other men murmured their agreement.

It was then, as I looked round them, that I realized there was no higher ranking officer in the dug-out than my own of Captain. "Who's your CO?" I asked.

"Captain Braithwaite," Marten replied blithely.

"Where is he?"

"He's out picking flowers," Marten said, barely suppressing a smirk.

"Are you trying to tell me that your CO is a casualty?" I found the euphemism, not to mention his attitude, suddenly more than a little distasteful. If this Braithwaite had bought it, the humour of his men was callous in the extreme.

"No, Sir." Marten made reference to my rank for the first time. He had the good sense also to moderate his tone somewhat. "Captain Braithwaite is out picking flowers. He thought they would brighten up the dug-out a bit."

"In the middle of *that*?" Incredulity raised my voice, but it was then that I realized that the shelling was over.

Nevertheless, Marten let the opportunity to smart-alec me pass. "Cap's a very brave man," he said. "He'd do anything for us. Every man here owes him his sanity, if not his life." Again a chorus of enthusiastic assent from the other soldiers. The sense of fun was gone though. And I could not escape the feeling that I was missing something. While I could not believe anyone would go outside

for such a frivolous purpose during an artillery attack, the man was clearly not present in the dug-out.

"Well, it's been nice, Corporal Hawthorne," Marten, "but it might be a good idea to take advantage of this break in the weather and see if you can get back to your General. Sutherland, here, will point you in the right direction." A stocky chap with a child's chubby cheeks jumped to his feet energetically and retrieved his helmet from the bedpost before wagging his eyebrows at me. The welcoming atmosphere felt somewhat tainted following the bizarre exchange concerning their Captain, but I still didn't want to leave – especially having heard so little about this extraordinary Braithwaite. And yet, I knew Marten was right. If there was a time to head back, now was it.

While Sutherland bounded up the steps ahead of me I turned to the assembled men, "I'd like to come back and meet your Captain Braithwaite some day," I said.

"I know he'd be delighted to make your acquaintance, Sir." Marten nodded agreeably. "Well, safe journey..."

An explosion right at the dug-out entrance sent Sutherland tumbling down the steps to land at my feet in a spray of debris. A second round of artillery exchange was under way. Sutherland, breathing hard, blinked in shock for a moment – I could see his brain processing what had happened.

At the same time as he said, "Stormy again. Probably need an umbrella," I heard a subdued, but distinctly terrified, moan. Added to my unexpected plunge back into the trench hell I thought I had left forever the previous year, that sound was enough to unnerve me to the edge of panic. By some instilled reflex I had drawn my service revolver.

"What was that?" As I said it, I stepped towards Marten.

The nerveless bastard looked straight back at me without blinking. "What was what?" he said.

My gaze flitted around the room. The rest of the men watched with interest, some with evident amusement. It wasn't right. "I heard someone," I said.

"Sutherland?" Marten shrugged his eyebrows laconically.

"Not Sutherland," I snapped. "Tell me again, where is your Captain?"

"I told you, Sir. He's out..."

"I don't believe you."

He stared back impassively, as if he didn't know what all the fuss was about.

"Marten," I said, maddened that he continued to deny the sound I had clearly heard, and desperate to make some sense of the situation. "I have reason to believe that something has happened to your CO. Understand that I will use this gun if you do not tell me the truth." I hardly knew what I was saying. It was a ridiculous threat. I have never shot anyone face-to-face, and I was pretty sure I did not possess the unwarranted ruthlessness to carry out my threat now. And it looked as though Marten knew it. "Aren't you afraid?" I punctuated my words by rolling back the hammer of the gun.

The supercilious smile that came as he said, "Not a bit,

Sir," almost tipped me into unreason. I would have done almost anything at that moment to wipe it off his face. I felt my finger begin to squeeze the trigger. Saw that he observed that twitch.

Another muffled sound. This time more of a scream than a moan. It came from the shadowy rear of the room. I strode over there, and discovered a curtained-off alcove behind one of the empty bunks. I yanked aside the grimy cloth and found a man lying in a rough hollowed-out bed-shelf padded with blankets. He might even have been fairly comfortable were it not for his bound limbs and the roll of old bandages stuffed into his mouth. I had no doubt that this was the mysterious Braithwaite, but I could not for the life of me fathom what their purpose was in keeping him like this. Then I looked again. Something about the face, the soft jawline, the straight sandy hair... *Braithwaite*. I had been at school with a Braithwaite. A cheerful chap with whom I'd passed many muddy, happy hours in the Second 15. Unbelievable that this could be the same person, but I could not doubt the similarities.

When I reached out, his eyes flew open, bulging wildly. I imagine I saw a flicker there that he recognized me too. Certainly, nothing else can explain what was to follow. As my fingers touched his shoulder, he trapped them between his wrist-bound hands. I struggled to free myself, but he held on with grim determination. When I looked back to the men for aid, I discovered the muzzle of Gordon's rifle six inches from my chest.

"I'm afraid we can't let the Captain go, Hawthorne," Marten said. "It's as I told you, my man. He's very, very good too us. So good that we have to keep him safe from any possible harm. We need him. It'd be our ruin, if he ever left us."

I had no idea what he was talking about, but the captive was clearly terrified, possibly to the point of mental breakdown. "Your Captain needs help," I managed, pain blooming in my hand as the man's grip tightened.

"Not possible," Marten shook his head. "No doctors for Braithwaite, I'm afraid. And that goes for you too. I'm sorry but you can't be making any reports about this. It's been difficult enough keeping him secret this long. Sorry, old man." Then he executed a *what-can-I-do?* shrug.

Gordon levelled his gun at me and I knew then with absolute certainty that they were going to kill me. Perhaps in as little as a few seconds. My limbs were heavy, filled with the same icy water that beaded my brow, collected around my collar. I was aware only of the gun and of counting my hopeless breaths. And of Braithwaite's grip around my fingers, a hot, hot clench that tightened until I thought my knuckles would pop and dislocate, my slender finger bones splinter.

There was screaming, but it wasn't mine.

Braithwaite let go.

And I was no longer afraid. Of anything.

"I think it's time Corporal Hawthorne went for a stroll, Gordon," Marten said.

Everything after that was dreamlike, I remember it all vividly but none of it seems in any way real. I nodded meekly, accepting my fate and not minding. Allowed

myself to be ushered to the stairs, even as the Captain began to wail again. As if he knew what was coming.

"Bye, then," I said, and began to climb the stairs, Gordon and his gun at my back.

Outside, on the firing step, peering into no-man's land, I noticed with surprise that night had fallen. A clear, black sky, pricked with uncountable stars, stretched across the blasted field. Bright wands of searchlight beams angling up from both sides made it feel like fairyland. That was what I thought of as I clambered out of the trench – that it was a place as ethereal as the music of Debussy. It utterly delighted me. I looked back once, saw Gordon watching from the shadows. He sketched a cheerful wave, and I smiled. It was a pleasant evening, and as I began to walk, I felt good. More than that. Happy. As if all my cares had been lifted from my shoulders. Even if I stumbled over the broken ground, had to pick my way between the blackened and shattered stumps of trees, all that remained of a once charming little wood. Even if I knew I was being watched with incredulity by snipers. Even if I was waiting for the bullets to come as soon as the Germans got over the surprise of this idiot Englishman ambling along like a weekend promenader. Waiting for the bullets. Happy, I began to whistle as I walked.

The bullets came, singing harmonics to my tune.

It's been two months since they shipped me back. I've healed well – you can hardly see the limp thanks to this Kentish weather and the country lanes that make my daily walks a pleasure. To all intents and purposes, I appear fit to return.

There. I've told it.

No, no quite all of it.

Because it's not really my health you're interested in, is it, *Doctor*? Not even my noted curious calm and good cheer while all around me here were jelly-headed wrecks. In fact, I even doubt that you are a real doctor – something about the way you mutter "shell shock" as if it covers a multitude of mental malaises, the way our conversations loop around repeatedly to the nightmare I had three nights ago, the way you were unknown at this hospital until two days ago. The way you keep asking me *how I know*. How I know details of the latest disastrous push along the Somme when the Commons haven't even been told yet. How I know, to the minute, *when* it happened.

What can I tell you? For two months I have lived without fear. Can you imagine that? No nightly terrors as memories of the trenches populated my dreams. In fact no dreams at all. No daily anxieties about being sent back, either. Going back would have been no more than a nuisance – after all, I love it here. I possessed not one ounce of fear of death or danger. But not just that. All those minor trepidations that hamper one's life were gone too – fear of infirmity, fear of old age, fear of living a life unloved, fear of failure. All gone. I was confident, relaxed and generally happy with the world. If it was insanity it was a most benign form. I didn't even care what people would think of me for extenuating Braithwaite's plight

by keeping quiet about it. I try to tell myself that anyone who witnessed the daily horrors of the Somme might have done the same.

Three nights ago I dreamt for the first time in two months. I dreamt of the trenches. We were crouched on the firing step, awaiting the signal. Then up and over the top, and immediately figures around me were spinning and crumpling amid a rattling hail of Maxim fire. One of them was Braithwaite. I woke screaming and sweating, and knotting my sheets in a heart-gripping panic.

I felt fear.

That's how I know what I dreamt was real.

And yes, now I'm scared of going back; and I'm equally scared you won't believe this ridiculous story and report me as a spy. It has all returned after my cruel emotional lacuna, and it feels a dozen times worse than I remember. But at the same time, I know I've got it easy.

Think about this. Marten and his boys had a problem. It was all very well managing to keep the state of affairs under wraps in the long stretches of inactivity, but when the order came for that push, what were they to do with Braithwaite? If they left him behind they risked discovery, and faced court marshal, and much worse – losing him. If, miraculously, any of them survived. Really, they had no choice than to untie him, stick a tin hat on his head and a gun in his hand, and take him with them.

Good old Captain Braithwaite – a man who so cared about the young soldiers in his charge that he'd have done anything to help unburden them of their anxieties.

Imagine him as the whistles shrilled along the line, stumbling along behind his brave boys who strode ahead, shielding him as well as they could, unfazed by the notion of walking towards their deaths. Imagine the crushing weight on his soul of not only his own personal terror, but the excess burden of six others.

I can't stop thinking about it, Doctor. Believe me, the foggy fields of shell shock would be welcome. Even death, a blessing.

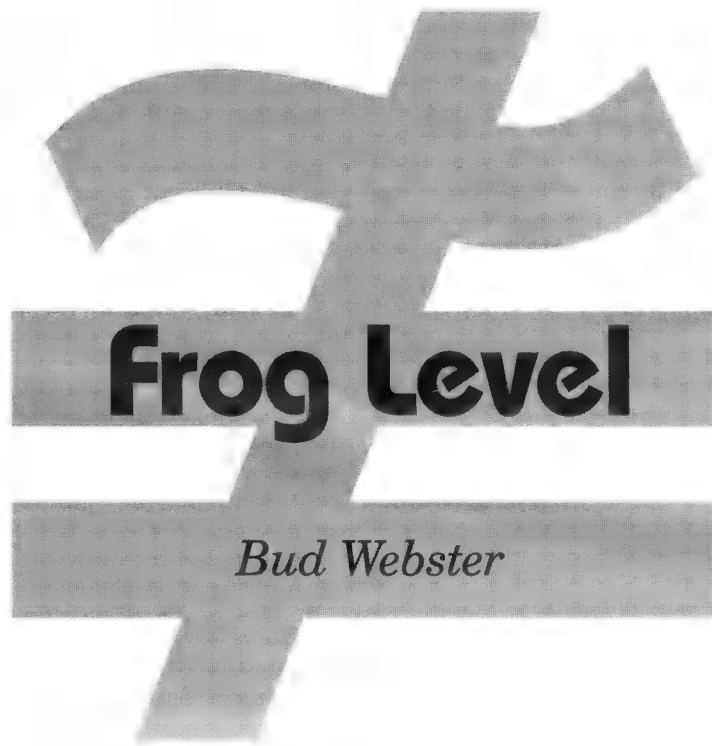
But this war is neither generous nor even-handed with its blessings.

I wish I could tell you something that would have you certify me as unsuitable for service, keep me here until the war is over, but there have been enough lies. I thought of myself as a good man, but I have been colder and more callous than I would have believed capable of my nature. And all at the expense of a man who, even in his own terror, recognized me as one who once called him a friend.

Perhaps it is right, after all, for me to return to the front. If you have any compassion, Doctor, perhaps you would tell them that that is my wish. It is surely fitting for a man to choose to die in a place where he found happiness.

Neil Williamson previously appeared in *Interzone* with "Sins of the Father,"

■ collaboration with Mark Roberts (issue 177). He lives in Glasgow, and has published fiction in *The Third Alternative*, *Decalog 5: Wonders*, *Albedo 1* and *Scheherazade*.



The boxcar rocked and the rough boards hummed beneath me like marimba bars as the train sped... somewhere. I didn't know where then, and I'm still not sure. I had just awakened from a dream I couldn't remember, and I could still feel the oppressiveness and anxiety of it. I looked around and saw I wasn't alone; there was an old man stretched out on a sheet of cardboard a few feet away. The Old Man...

How had we ended up in a boxcar? I tried to remember, but the too-brief sleep I'd gotten hadn't been restful, and I was foggy. Hadn't I been on a bus, on my way south?

The bus, right. It came back to me through the fog, the high weirdness on the bus. It had gotten weird pretty quickly.

"There are *two* Frog Levels in the Commonwealth of Virginia," the old man had whispered loudly. That's how this thing had begun, on a south-bound bus one August afternoon and with that simple touch of madness.

"Two." I smiled dully back at him and tried to bury myself in my book. "That's... interesting."

"Two!" he repeated, wagging two calloused fingers in

my face. I noticed that his eyes didn't look in quite the same direction. "Trick is," the old man said, "trick is knowing which one is the *real* one." He shook his head. "If we could just manage to be in both of 'em at the same time, we'd know which one was the real one, and which one the aliens sent us for a birthday present."

I closed my book and sighed. I'd only been pretending to read, anyway.

"Birthday present?"

"Hell, yes. Always nice to get a birthday present."

"From *aliens*?"

He gave me a patient look. "Well, it ain't no fun if you got to give one to yourself, now, is it?"

"I guess not." It was easier to let it go; I didn't have the wherewithal to argue just then – not that I ever did, these days.

Now I watched as the miles inched past the open boxcar doors. It was dusty and noisy, but the gentle rocking and the rhythmic clatter of the wheels against the rails was almost hypnotic, not that that's an original observation. It dawned on me that I was experiencing the very

phenomenon that gave birth to all those train songs I'd heard as a kid. There was probably some kind of metaphor about my life in there somewhere, too. Not that I cared to look for it. My life sucked. My life...

This deconstruction of my life had really begun when my thesis advisor called me into his office the previous Monday morning before class.

He'd looked at me from across his desk. His office was small, crowded, and filled from floor to ceiling with bookcases. They, in turn, were filled with books. There were no flat surfaces to be seen. On the wall above his head was an autographed photo of his beloved Mudhens.

"Ian," he said quietly, "you're one of the best music teachers I've ever seen. You have an innate grasp of metre and rhythm, and you can see things in the music that the composers may not even have known they put in there." He shook his head. "Hell, you showed me things about *The Rite of Spring* that were new to me, and I've been studying that damn-silly piece of dance music for 30 years."

I waited. There was a "but" coming up.

He shrugged. "You're a 'rolling stone,' if I may quote the Great Dylan. You've got no direction, no centre. I don't doubt for a minute that you've got the requisite knowledge stacked in your head, but there's no focus to any of it." He began idly rearranging things on his desk top; without being aware of it, I watched the patterns as they changed.

"The committee has turned your latest thesis proposal down, Ian. It's been done already, and they don't think that the process of writing it will be enough of an exercise to make it worthwhile." He picked at something in front of him. "This is your third rejection, and you're close to losing your assistantship."

"What about..." I began.

"I think it's in your best interest if you take a little time off," he interrupted. "Give the whole thing some thought. Decide what you want to do, where you want to go." He shook his head. "Not just academically. You're not going to be any good to us here if you're stumbling over the rest of your life. Otherwise," he said, spreading his hands helplessly and looking grim, "otherwise, we'll have to send you back down to the minors, or give you your outright release. I'm sorry, Ian."

I was stunned. Speechless. All those other things, too. I shifted in my seat and something crinkled in my back pocket; the note my girlfriend had left me when she moved out over the weekend. It said pretty much the same thing, but with a lot less consideration.

"I..." My throat clicked. "I don't know what to say, Nick."

He shook his head again. "You don't have to say anything, Ian. But you really do need to *do* something." He opened his desk drawer and pulled out a sheet of his personal stationery. Unscrewing his fountain pen, he wrote on the paper and blotted it. "Here's the address of a folk-music centre in North Carolina. See if you can turn up a thesis idea there, okay?" He handed it to me and I folded it carefully and put it in my wallet. "You can do this, Ian. I know you can."

We both stood, and he reached for my hand; I took it numbly, but with gratitude. I didn't question his sincerity at all; we'd known each other too long. I also didn't doubt he was right about what I had to do; but I wasn't at all sure he was right about the rest.



Now, looking out the doors of the boxcar in the late August afternoon, I was too bewildered to be sure about anything. I wasn't even sure where we were, except that we were still north of Richmond. Hell, I was from Van Nuys, what did I know about Virginia? I saw houses from time to time, and once in a while we'd go through some small town with its feedlots and convenience stores, but they could have been anywhere. Where this old geezer was going was anybody's guess.

He was awake now, too, staring up at the ceiling with his hands crossed behind his head. I looked him over again, more carefully this time. He was older than dirt, true, but his eyes were a lot clearer than I'd first thought, for all that they were out of kilter. That doesn't mean much – John Wayne Gacy had clear eyes – but it was an indication that at least he wasn't a crazed Sterno-bum. He was clean, if shabby, and he had an undeniable dignity.

Dignity. That was just one of the many things that I didn't have. I can't say that I missed it as much as I missed my girl, frankly. I was both desperate and desperately tired. All I had was a knapsack and a badly overdrawn emotional bank account.

I wanted to compose music, to write songs, to play them for people and make them sit up and take notice. I couldn't, and had never been able to. Do you know what it's like to burn with music and not have a voice to sing it with? Like the Who said: "Schizophrenic, hell. I'm quadrophenic!"

I'd been trying hard not to think about those things back on the bus. "Birthday present, huh?" I said, trying to get my mind off my life. "When exactly was our birthday?"

"Long time ago. Back in the scaly-o-zoic era, I figure."

"Before humans, right?"

"Don't be stupider than you have to be, son," he said scornfully. "Aliens ain't gonna give no presents to no lizards, no matter how big they are."

"But, I thought..."

"No, you didn't or you'd of not shot off your mouth about stuff you don't know about."

"Okay, then," I said, a little piqued, "Define your terms. When exactly was the 'scaly-o-zoic'?"

"It was when we first made up songs. Or was it the first time we ate fish?" He shrugged. "It don't matter. Both happened about the same time."

I was confused and getting more so. "We invented music and seafood at the same time?" I asked.

"Yep," he said. "3:17 A.M. in the morning." He sighed. "Boy, those were the days."

It made as much sense as anything else he'd said, not that that was saying a lot. The old guy was obviously crazy as a shit-house rat, but he was at least an interesting rat.

The other passengers on the bus had either studiously

ignored us or stared blatantly. I leaned closer and lowered my voice.

"Given all that, how old are we?"

"Oh, we ain't had our first birthday party yet. Don't get me wrong, I'm not talking about anniversaries here. They give that other Frog Level to us the day we was born. Still," he continued with a shrug, "it's been longer than I can remember, and I was a old fart before you was hatched."

"The Earth is four-and-a-half billion years old, or so the scientists say."

He shrugged again. "Drop in the bucket, boy. I got socks older'n that. Anyways, birthdays ain't always reckoned in years."

"But what's your interest in all this? And why are you talking to me about it?" I wasn't sure I wanted to know the answer, but there was no way I wasn't going to ask.

"Because somebody's got to send 'em a thank-you note."

"Thank-you note? Are you out of...?" But of course. "How? How do you write a thank-you note to aliens? Crop circles?"

He looked at me in horror. "You don't believe in *that* booshwah, do you? If so, we might as well end this conversation right here and now."

I should have done it. I should have said, "Yes. I *do* believe in crop circles, and the Loch Ness Monster, and Bigfoot." But I didn't. Years of knee-jerk scepticism made me say, "No, of course not."

"Well, then, fine. I got a job to do, and I can't do it by myself. If I could, I'd've done it long since. I need your help."

I frowned. This could get sticky. "Help. Help how?"

"That," he said firmly, "remains to be sawn." And he stood up and signalled to the driver to stop.

Why? Why on the face of this good, green Earth did I follow this crazy old man off that bus? I know I've asked myself that question every day since I did, and I have no more answer now than I did the day I got up and went after him.

Or, perhaps I do; he was the straw at which I was grasping.

If my problem was that I didn't have a focus in my life, it certainly wasn't the old man's. Hell, *he* was focused to a point so fine that you could barely see it. Call it an obsession (I know damned well I would), call it whatever, he knew what the problem was, and he knew the solution, and he was determined to apply the latter to the former if it killed him. Us.

He had a "voice," a presence, cracked as it was. I didn't, and how could anybody hear me... *why* would anybody listen to me if I didn't have my own voice? I could feel the lack of it, deep inside, an aching wound that had been scooped out of me like a melon ball so many years ago I couldn't remember not hurting.

Maybe, just *maybe*, I had something to learn from him. And maybe it would be a lark, a story to dine out on. That would come in handy when the money gave out. It might help stave off dumpster-diving for a few weeks. In any case, anything was better than the bleak landscape inside my own head.

"Look," I said, "I don't even know who you are. You don't know who *I* am. Hell, I could be anybody. We're on a *bus*,

for Chrissakes! How do you know you can trust me?"

"I don't. I trust myself. I'm the only one knows me well enough. And who I am doesn't matter. Let's just say I'm 'of no fixed abode.'"

There was a time when I actually chose to go cross-country on buses. I thought it was romantic. I thought it would give me the edge that Kerouac and Cassidy had, the world-weary experience and gritty sense of realism that I thought was integral to the Beats. At the time, I was dismayed by how wrong I was: it was noisy, filthy, smelly, it made my ass hurt; and let's not even go near the bathroom facilities, either figuratively or literally. If that was what made the Beats what they were, they were welcome to it.

This time it wasn't by choice, I simply didn't have any other way to get where I needed to go.



I hate buses. The only thing I care less for is woods. I know that's unhip, but I don't apologize for it. They look great on greeting cards, and they're perfect for writing songs about, but they're dirty, musty, and they tear your clothes. So guess what was right in front of us when we got off that bus?

We must have hiked four miles through those damned woods. Can you imagine *anything* that would make you nostalgic for a Greyhound in August? Well, I can, and we traipsed through them at a pace that kept me breathless. And it started raining the minute we stepped off the bus, a hot, clammy drizzle that ran down my neck and managed to soak my shirt through from the inside out.

"My... my name is... Ian. I'm a... music teacher," I said between pants. "Can we slow down some?"

"Nearly there, music teacher. Can't you hear it yet?"

I stopped. There was something, off in the distance. A train whistle, almost below the threshold of hearing.

"You don't mean...!" I said, horror dawning.

"First thing you've got right, boy. We gonna hop us a freight and catch us some real miles. Where we're going, you can't get there from here."

"But... I've never done anything like that in my life!"

"First time for everything. Well, almost everything. There's never a first time for a tuna-melt on rye toast in aspic." He shuddered. "Boy, I'll never do *that* again."

"But isn't, uh, 'hopping a freight' against the law?"

"Depends on the law. If you go by the law of supply and demand, etiquette demands we send a thank you note, and we gotta supply it. If you go by the law of averages, well, I figure there's one of us that don't cover."

"What about the law of conservation of energy?" I muttered.

"That's a good 'un. Hang onto it, you'll need it later."

"Wait a minute," I said, trying to catch my breath. "If... we're going to be hobos, don't we need one of those bags on a stick?"

He snorted. "Nawp, and if you see any see-gars with toothpicks in 'em on the ground, just leave 'em lay."

As we went along, the old man would pull up a weed or pick leaves off some bush, and he carefully placed them in the centre of a rag he took out of his back pocket.

I didn't want to know what they were for.

I heard a loud hissing noise ahead of us, and the old man began to walk even faster.

"Hurry up, boy, or we'll miss our ride!"

We ran around a bend in the creek and, sure enough, there was a long freight moving slowly across a trestle. The old man stopped and scanned the train carefully.

"Gotta keep away from the bulls," he muttered. "They wouldn't understand, nawsir. Gotta find us a nice side-door Pullman, most of these are grainers. *THERE!* That's the one!" He took off running, and it was all I could do to keep up.

The car we were headed for was a dilapidated old box-car that looked like it had been built some time around the Napoleonic wars and had seen heavy use since. It had those cryptic numbers on it that you always see on freight trains, but nothing like C&O or N&W or any of the freight-line company names I remembered. It looked drafty and dirty and musty, all the things I didn't want to be right then.

The train moved slowly enough that the old man was able to grab the open door with one hand and the floor with the other and pull himself inside. I tried to do the same and almost slipped. He grabbed my arm and just hauled me in like I was a sack of potatoes. I rolled over and sat up in the doorway, and he slapped me across the back of the head.

"Never, and I mean *never*, sit in the doorway of a freight car, boy! If that door comes loose and slams shut, what do you figure to walk out of here on?"

I nodded; it made sense. I pulled in my legs and settled down.



Which is how we ended up in a beat-to-shit freight car that rattled like an angry snake somewhere in the wilds of Virginia in the middle of the Dog Days.

Actually, I guess it was pretty cosy, looking back on it. It was dry, the wind was broken enough by the boards that by the time it got to us it was a breeze that stirred the dust in eddies. It had last been used (as near as I could tell) to haul apples. That sharp, sweet tang was a welcome memory from my childhood; I'd grown up on a farm that had orchards.

"Okay," I said. "You got me here. What's next?"

"We got a ways to go, so settle down and get some rest. You done pretty good so far. For a stiff."

I was more pleased by this than I let on. I wasn't sure why, but it felt fine. Was I really a hobo now? Just from riding a train without paying? If so, it sure felt better than being a spectacularly unsuccessful grad student.

There was some old excelsior padding bunched up in a corner, and I nestled into it. The space between the boards was enough for me see out, and I watched the countryside go by in the early dusk. This was a *lot* more cool than taking the bus, for all the dust and roughness. Hell, you had to pay to get on a bus; this was free. Maybe this was why hobos were hobos.

"Aaahhhhhh..." The old guy stood silhouetted in the doorway, taking a leak onto the tracks. "Ain't nothing in

the world like pissing out a train car to tell the bastards you're here, boy. Nothing in this world or any of the others."

He finished, straightened his clothes, and then lay down on a big piece of cardboard with his hands behind his head. I looked him over, trying to picture him as a younger man. I failed miserably.

"You know," I said, "this 'hobo' thing could work out pretty good. You get to travel, you don't have to work, no responsibilities... yeah, I could get used to this." I smiled at the thought.

He snorted hard in the dimness of the car. "KEE-ris, boy, you don't know shit from Sherlock, do you? Let me explain something to you.

"I been a hobo, man and boy, since I was 14 years old. I run away at a time when they *wasn't* no jobs to be had. Back then you worked or you didn't eat. Hell, even in the jungles you was expected to pony up something for the pot.

"And I've had just about every job they was to be had, short of workin' in a office somewhere. I followed the harvest for years, I washed dishes, I laid rails, I built some houses and I tore some down. When I couldn't get work like that I beat rugs or chopped firewood for a hand-out, or a sit-down if I was lucky.

"What you're talking about," he went on, "is bein' a tramp, and I don't have no truck with tramps. Tramps are dirty. They beg. They get drunk. They lie and they cheat and they steal. The hardest work they'll do is grifting some honest stiff, and then they'll blow it all on cheap wine and dice games."

He sat up and looked at me, his face light in the gathering gloom. "They got no *pride*, son, and they're proud of it. You can feel just as sorry for yourself as you care to, but you ain't a tramp or I'd of known it and you wouldn't be here right now."

"But, I thought..."

He waved it away. "So you keep saying, but I haven't seen no evidence of it yet," he said ruefully and lay back down.

The rails sang under us. I didn't like what the old man said, but I couldn't argue with it.

"All right, you know so much about me, but I still don't know about you," I asked. "Who are you, and why is this so important to you?"

"It's important to me because gifts should be acknowledged. It's the proper thing to do. It's important because I was brought up better than to let a gift go by unthanked." He looked wry. "It don't even matter if it ain't terrible much of a gift, it was still give to us. We all get gifts, some more than others, but ain't too many of them ever get used. Just like a fondue pot. And it don't matter to anybody here who I am, long as *they* know. Now, get some sleep. We got miles to make."

"I'm sorry," I said, shaking my head, "but I'm just too wired to sleep."

He sighed. "S'pose you wanna talk." I nodded in the dark. "Okay, we'll talk some, but we both need to sleep or we're never gonna get there."

"Look," I began. "I know you're crazy. That's okay. I'm sane, and it hasn't done me a bit of good."

"Go on." If he resented my remark it didn't show.

"Well, I'm not good at much of anything. I do okay teaching music, but that's not anything special. I just don't think I'm who you need to... to do whatever it is you want us to do."

"And who might you be to make that judgment, boy?" The words sounded harsh, but his voice didn't; he spoke low and kindly. "If you're such a screw-up, why trust yourself to trust yourself?"

"But why *me*? There were plenty of other people on that bus. Why did you single me out?"

He was quiet for a long while. Somewhere off in the far distance, another train whistled low and lonely. "I might claim that you looked me in the eye when you got on the bus. Not many care to. Could be that I saw something in you that you needed to know about. Might be that you know better than you think, and think better than you know." He stood up in the swaying car, keeping his knees slightly bent in a way that told me he'd done this countless times before, and stretched. "Gettin' old, son. Not as spry as I used to be." He turned and faced me, although I couldn't see him in the gloom except as a dim shape in the doorway.

"I'm gonna tell you something that you probably won't understand, and that's okay. I looked at you, and I seen a man who long ago took hisself to a dark and lonesome place and then left hisself there. You been trying to find your way back ever since, and that's a damn shame, but you forgot that it was you that lost you in the first place."

He hunkered down on his haunches beside me, hands between his splayed knees.

"Don't matter if you believe me. What is, is, and what isn't, is not. You're not half what you could be, and you're twice the lowly bastard you're afraid you are, but you ain't been sewed up in a shroud yet. There's time to strike a light and bring yourself home. Mayhap you'll find your match when we get where we're goin'." After a minute he stood and turned back to the door, looking out into the night.

I noticed then that my face was wet. My throat ached and there was a burning in my chest, and something deep inside me felt broken.

He spoke again without turning. "That dangly thing in front of you is the end of your rope, boy. You can either hang yourself with it or haul yourself up by it. Your choice."

I sat there without speaking, thinking about what he'd said. I didn't like it. I never liked it when somebody else was right about me, and for all his shabbiness and lack of a handle on consensual reality, he was dead-on right.

"So you're my rope, is that it?"

"I said you wouldn't understand. Goddam metaphors. If you'd stop thinking about yourself for a while, you wouldn't be so damn thoughtless."

I didn't want to think about it, so I changed the subject. "You mentioned something earlier about being in two places at once. How is that possible?"

"We can do it. It ain't easy, nawsir, but we can do it. It's an old Indian trick."

"Yeah? Which ones?"

He looked at me with those eyes. "You deaf? The old ones. Now sleep."

And I did. And dreamed as I slept, badly.



And so I woke up. We were going at a pretty good clip. It had been full dark when I went to sleep; now the light from outside was muted, like twilight in summer. There was something odd about it, something I couldn't quite put my finger on. Eldritch? Is that the word? In any case, it was impossible to judge how much time had passed.

I took stock. I was God-knew-where, with this old man who was demonstrably as crazy as a loon, on a freight train in a rickety old boxcar. I was stiff, it was hot, and I was hungry. I sat up and shook my head to try and clear it. This had gone seriously past the point of being a lark.

I asked him again, this time a little more pointedly, "Look, who *are* you? I've got to know."

He looked over at me, for once both eyes staring directly into mine.

"I am mortally weary of you asking that same damn question, is who I am. But since you ask so nice, I'll tell you – if you got the guts to hear it.

"I am who I am, boy. I am a man of constant sorrow. I am a man of the moon. I am the man of a thousand faces. I am the man who never says die." He drew himself up to his full height and continued, his voice getting louder and stronger.

"I am he who knocked one over the fence in 1925, the one that all know as the old man down the road. I hold nothing in my hands that I cannot own, and nothing sets in my pockets that I did not put there. There are no flies on me, nor are there mind-control rays from Mars. I am no longer well-to-do and never was. I have all that I can do to stand before you and am as strong as the rails that rumble beneath our asses."

As he spoke, he leaned closer to me so that I could feel his breath, warm against my face. It smelled of coffee and time.

"Most of all, I am Norton the Second, Emperor of the United States of America and Protector of Mexico, a direct descendant of Emperor Joshua Abraham Norton the First. I am all that, and I contain several multitudes, boy, and don't you forget it." He held my eyes with his for a moment longer, then leaned back and looked out at the world.

"I think I understand," I said in a hushed voice.

"Nawp, not yet you don't," he sighed, "but it's a start."

We sat in silence after that, watching the passing scenery. Presently, I could make out a train yard up ahead, and the old man – the Emperor! – gathered himself up.

"Time to go, son. Don't leave nothing behind that you brought, and don't take anything with you that was already here."



We hopped off the train as it crept past a siding. That weird light showed a flat, grassy area surrounded by trees and brush. A bulky figure was carefully stirring something in a big coffee can held over a fire by sticks.

The old man called out, "Hey, 'bo!"

The figure rose and bowed low. "Welcome, Your Imperial Majesty." His voice rumbled deep and clear, like a slow freight rolling on fresh snow.

The Emperor waved a hand in dismissal. "Don't stand on ceremony, 'bo, just set back down and mind your mulligan. Anything in that pot for us?"

"It's all for you, Your Imperial Majesty," the big man replied as he resumed stirring, "if you've got the hunger and a little something to add to it."

"Oh, we got the hunger, all right," the old man said. "And I've got just the thing to make it *pee-cont*." He reached into his back pocket, brought out that old rag and tied it in a knot. He tossed this to the figure who caught it without looking.

"How long are we gonna be?" I asked the old man querulously.

He shrugged. "I'll be five-feet ten inches. How 'bout you?"

"That's not what I meant."

"I know what you meant. *You* don't know what you meant. Just set back and relax yourself."

I tried to. I sat down with my back against an old wooden crate that, from the smell, had once held onions. I could hear night birds and cicadas, and in the distance the clanking and chuffing of the train yard. After a while, I noticed that my breathing was easier, and my eyes were becoming accustomed to the strange light.

The big man at the fire leaned in to add the contents of the rag to whatever it was in the can. As he did, the flames illuminated a face that was somehow even older than the Emperor's, for all that there were no lines or wrinkles. I got the idea that he was so old that erosion had erased any mark of time.

I tapped the Emperor on the arm. "Who's he?" I asked in a low voice, then added, "Your Majesty."

He shook his head. "Y'know, for somebody who don't even know his own self, you got a hell of an obsession with knowing who everybody else is. Besides, I ain't been here any longer than you. Hey, 'bo," he said in a louder voice, "you got a monicker?"

The big man paused and set the ladle down on a tin plate. "Yeah, I got a few. I get called a lot of stuff. 'Easy' Ace, Tarheel Slim, Sidedoor, Tiny... you name it, I been called it." He stood and stretched. "Right now, though, I'm just the Cook."

The breeze was wafting the aroma of good, hearty stew to us and my mouth watered. I felt like I hadn't eaten for days, and I'd been a lot more active than I'm used to.

"Cook," I asked, a little nervously. "Where exactly are we?"

He looked around slowly, and then turned to me. "Dunno, exactly. Could be anywhere. Place like this isn't exactly nailed down, you see. Might be you could walk in two different directions and end up the same place. Might could be you'd walk all day and night and never leave."

Although it was warm, I felt a chill. "What... what time is it?"

The Cook resumed stirring. "Why? You need to be somewheres?"

"No, I'm just... curious."

"Could be most any time, I guess. Could be March, or time-and-a-half. Could be time for every purpose under Heaven. Might could even be Thursday. Time don't change much here. It don't have to. It never gets full dark, never gets full light. Way I see it," he looked up and nodded to me, "it's pretty fine the way it is. Not so bright it blinds you, not so dark you can't see the mysteries." The fire popped and sparks flew up around his face. "All I know is I been sittin' here stirring this mulligan since I inherited it from the last Cook, back a long ways. Should be ready most any time, now."

"Then if the time is right," the Emperor said, "dip us out a bowl apiece, and we'll be much obliged."

The Cook reached for a couple of battered old soup bowls and ladled some of the stew into them. He passed them to us one at a time, then tore off two big hunks of dark bread and tossed them to us. I noticed that he didn't eat himself, and asked him if he wasn't going to join us.

"Preciate the thought," he said, shaking his head, "but naw. I don't eat much. Never did. And anyhow, I ain't s'posed to."

"Here's to it, then," the Emperor said and began to eat. I soaked up some of the stew with my bread and tasted it. It was unbelievably good; rich without being overwhelming, just sweet and salty enough to make you want more. The meat – whatever it was, and I didn't care to speculate – was so tender it almost fell apart without being chewed. As I swallowed that first bite, I could feel all the cells in my body open up in surprise and welcome. It was like eating for the first time in my life, and I began shovelling it in as fast as I could.

Then the old man spoke up. "Now, I need to warn you, son," he said as I dipped my bread back into the stew, "that this is gonna open some doors you didn't even know was there. By whatever time this is tomorrow, we're gonna know for sure about those two Frog Levels."

This was getting too weird for me. Hell, this had started out as a joke; I was following some crazy guy around the countryside looking for proof that we'd gotten a present from aliens, for Christ's sake.

I put my bowl down. "Look, guys, this is right over the top. I can't go along with it any more, I don't even know what's *in* this stuff!"

"Ain't nothing in it you ain't had before," the Cook replied. "Ain't nothing in it you didn't already have in you."

"Too late now, anyway," the old man said. "Might as well have a full stomach for what lies ahead."

"What lies ahead?" I asked in desperation.

"No more lies," the old man said. "Just the truth."

I ate. There was an excitement in my belly that I couldn't deny. I was back on that train, strapped to the engine, and it was going downhill faster than a hell-bound bat.

"Look to your shadow, son," the Emperor said.

I looked down. It was where it had always been, at the end of my feet. Silently, I pointed to it.

"Naw," he said, "not that. That's just where you block the light. Where's your *shadow*?"

I didn't know. "If that's not my shadow, then where is it?" I was worried, it should have been back hours ago, or at least called.

The Cook said, "You didn't have it when you came in. From the looks of you, I'd say it's been gone a long time."

"Your shadow's your conscience, boy," the Emperor explained. "Your identity. Your integrity. Everybody's got one, they just lose 'em every once and again. They're the truth of you, but they're mysteries, too."

He stood, and wiped his hands on his pants. "You can't find it when you're in one place, because it could be anywhere. When you're in *two* places, though, it gets easier. It's always in the other one."

It didn't make sense. No, it made sense, but it was not-sense. Stuff and not-sense. After a while, though, it didn't seem so weird, just inevitable. Just unavoidable. Just amenable. Just a minute... It was just a matter of time.

"It's time to go, son."

"To the land of Mordor, where the shadows lie?"

"Shadows don't lie. We gotta get going."

"Where?" I stood up unclosely... excuse me, unsteadily. "If we don't know where we are, how will we know when we get where we're going?"

"Doesn't matter."

"What doesn't?"

"Matter, for one thing. Here, take my hand."

I did, although I already had two of my own. "Can we really do this?"

"We already have. Look around you."

It was dark, but a bright kind of dark that hurt my eyes. I could see everything, but there wasn't any light to see it by. Even the shadows were brightly lit; even the reflections of the sun in the windows were shaded.

"Are we... are we there?"

He shook his head. "'Theres'."

"What?"

"There's where we are." He pointed to a road sign. It read "Frog Level" in white letters against green. There seemed to be two of them though, one on the other, neither of them the same size or shape. I looked around as best I could, being eyeful... excuse me, mindful that my eyes hurt.

Vertigo, vertigoing, vertigone. I shook my head but couldn't shake the double vision. It was endless, it seemed; and seamless, it ended. With a bright snap, my head got itself around something larger than it could contain, and I found myself losing it.

I really was theres. I was in both Frog Levels at the same time, and ah, God, it *hurt*. It burned like I'd swallowed fire and sicked it back up; it hurt so bad I could goddam well hear it. I could see both place, not blurred, but slurred, slued, skewed. I was screwed, and I spewed. It hit the pavements and sparked.

"Here!" the old man shouted at me, pain in the ass that he was. Pain in my head, too, for all that he wasn't inside it. "Keep hold of my hand."

"Why, you going to drop it?"

"Look up the street," he said in his dark-light voice. "Look at the street and tell me what you see."

"I spy, with my little eye... something that begins the

beguine." I giggled at my own cleverness. He slapped me, hard, and my eyes blinked on and off rapidly.

"What do you *see*?"

I looked. I saw a roads, badly paved; a cars or two, a streets with a combination convenience stores and gas stations.

"I don't know," I said shakily. "I see what *you* see, I guess. What am I supposed to see?"

"What I *don't* see. Look at your reflection in that window. What are you wearing?"

"Out my welcome, I'd say. Aren't you?"

"Fine. And your shadow?"

"I can't look at them. It hurts too much."

"No, boy, you only have one. Nobody has but one. Now, *look for it!*"

I did. It wasn't there. It had to be somewhere, but I couldn't find it. I bet he couldn't, either, but I was too tired, hurt too much, to say so.

"You can't find it, can you?"

"No, it's not theres. I bet somebody stole it."

"Nobody stole it, you turned it loose a long time ago. But you got to find it now to be whole. You understand?"

"But I am whole, I'm an ass-whole." I half-laughed at my own purl of knit-wit.

"It's not here, boy, because *you* ain't here. You're *there*. You're in the other Frog Level. Feel around you, try and find it."

"I don't know, I don't feel too good. I don't feel well, either, I might be sick again."

"Be sick on your own time, not everybody else's."

With my eyes squeezed shut, I felt around for my shadow. I felt a round something at my feet, but it was a pumpkin. Didn't Jack Sprat keep his shadow in a pumpkin? Or was that Lamont Cranston and Margot Lane? I couldn't remember.

I picked up the pumpkin and shook it; it rattled and rolled out of my hands, so I chased it down the streets. I caught it just before it went around a corners and turned into a drugstores. Lucky me, I could never have picked it back up if it was a drugstores.

I hefted it over my head and threw it through the windows. It smashed, and my shadow leapt up and out and into me.

I thought it hurt before, but I was wronged. Fusing with my shadow was *fusion*; I was out of control in the heart of the sun. Blood burst hot from my heart and shattered against the light, sending bright shrapnel into me from the inside out. The Earth and all that went with it rose up and fell toward me. I was running out of time.

That's when it hit me. I understood at last, at least. I began humming a Bach Partita, and started running in time to it, eyes still clamped shut. I knew where the real Frog Level was. It was hidden by the Light of the Present, and I could find it if I could just hear the right note, the best note; the thank-you note.

Better than that: I was a musician, I was the Music Ian, and I could goddam well *write* the thank-you notes! I could *sing* the thank-you notes!

So I did, and I sang them loud and clear, and the aliens heard, and the old man was crying and shouting, and I

was breathless and not breathing and the notes went on and on like a flock of geese had flown out of my mouth and my lungs were full of air, full of the Air, an Air on the Geese String that wouldn't end until it was over, and it flew over and over both places called Frog Level, and if anyone but the aliens and the two of us heard it, well, we'll never know, will I?



By and by, I came back to myself, to my own head, to one place. I hurt all over, but not the same way being in two places did. It hurt good, like a hard day's work. And I suppose it had been just that.

I sat up and looked around. The clearing was gone, and the fire and the stew as well, although I'm sure that somewhere the Cook is still stirring, stirring, and offering his mulligan to hungry travellers. I was alone beside the creek.

I stood and stretched. It felt damned good, too. I felt damned good, as a matter of fact. I felt like a job well done and a full day's pay.

Something white fluttered against a nearby tree and caught my eye. I walked over and it was a note stuck to the trunk with a stag-handled penknife.

"Son," it said, "you done good when the push came to the shovel. I knew you had it in you when I first saw you, and now that you've let it out, you'll never be rid of it. Deal with that, and you'll never lose at poker.

"I'm out of here. I got places to be seen in and things to have done; I hear there's *three* goddamn Frog Levels in North Carolina alone, so I got my work cut out for me. Doubt I'll be back anytime soon, but you knew that anyway."

My eyes burned; probably smoke from the fire that wasn't there any more. I read on:

"Don't fret about getting back. Just follow the creek around to the left and it'll take you to the real Frog Level. From there, you can get to almost any place if you try hard enough.

"I give you my best. You already gave me yours."

It was signed, "Joshua Abraham Norton II, Emperor of the United States and Protector of Mexico."

I still have the note, in a frame on my office wall. I have an office wall, now, and an office for it to be in, I should point out. Something about that day (days? I'll never know) ironed out a lot of my own rough spots. After I got back home, I knuckled down and finished my Masters. I don't mind telling you that it wasn't a simple task; the habits of a lifetime aren't easily broken, and I'd had more of my energies invested in being lazy than I'd ever thought possible. But I managed it nonetheless, and now I'm teaching at a small college in the Mid-West, working on my doctorate.

I still have the penknife, too; it "sets in my pocket because I put it there." I don't use it much, I don't have to. It's enough to know where it came from and where it is. And you never know when you might need a penknife on the road.

I have something else, too, something I did not bring with me and which I will not take when I catch that last

westbound: it looks like a stone, smoothed as if by years under gently rushing water, grey and featureless. When I came out of that weird trance, it was nestled in the palm of my right hand. Warm to the touch even on a cold day, when I hold it, it says "You're welcome." There are no words – these are aliens, after all – but the thought is clear.

Aliens. Who'd have thought? And of course the Emperor was right; a second Frog Level might not be very useful, not the way a food processor or pasta machine is, but it sure beats the hell out of a fondue pot, and manners are manners.

My specialty is Music of the Iron Road. Hobo songs and poems, gathered by me each summer when I hit the rails to do more research. I bring other musicians to the college, too, with their guitars and banjos, their squeeze-boxes and mouth-harps. They play for my students and the faculty, the college pays them an honorarium as lecturers, and they pick up work at the bars in town.

And once a year, no matter where I am or what I'm doing, I make it a point to hop a freight car and piss out the door, to prove to the worlds that I'm here, and out of respect for the best and only Emperor I've ever known.

Most important, I write! Glory hallelujah, but I *write* and sing my own music now, and it's good, and I'm not the only one who thinks so. Banjo Jack Holloway has recorded three of my songs, and I'm becoming a regular at hobo gatherings at places like Elko and Pennsburg. I'm accepted by the old 'bos as one of their own, and is there any greater joy, any greater honour, than to be accepted?

It's a good life, I think.



Bud Webster lives in Richmond, Virginia, and the above is his first story for *Interzone*. He has published short stories variously, and is perhaps best known as the author of the "Bubba Pritchert" tales in *Analog* magazine. Re the Emperor Norton, a real-life character referred to in the above story, he explains for the sake of non-Americans:

"Joshua Abraham Norton, late of the Cape Colony, arrived in San Francisco in 1849 with a fortune. Lost that fortune trying to corner the lucrative rice market in 1854. Five years later, destitute and more than a brick shy of a load, he had this published in a local newspaper: 'At the pre-emptory request of a large majority of the citizens of these United States, I Joshua Norton, formerly of Algoa Bay, Cape of Good Hope, and now for the last nine years and ten months past of San Francisco, California, declare and proclaim myself the Emperor of These United States.' He went on to issue his own money (which was exchangeable for American dollars, and which was also accepted in many of the hotels and restaurants in town), propose building the Golden Gate Bridge and the formation of a League of Nations, and otherwise endear himself to the population of the city to the point of legend. When he died in 1880, more than 25,000 people attended his funeral. He was, perhaps, the first and most important of America's few True Eccentrics."

ANSIBLE LINK



DAVID LANGFORD

Years ago John Clute, John Grant, and their *Encyclopedia of Fantasy* team wrestled with tough problems of defining fantasy and telling good from bad. If only they'd had the help of Tom Snyder, whose www.movieguide.org review of Hayao Miyazaki's *Spirited Away* makes everything crystal clear while explaining how Miyazaki got it all wrong: "In a proper fantasy, the heroine might encounter messengers or representatives, allegorical or otherwise, from God or Jesus Christ, or even God Himself and/or one or more members of the Holy Trinity. The heroine certainly should not learn things from encountering pagan, animistic spirits, unless she's there to completely defeat them and/or worship or honor the One True God of the Bible. This is the difference between good fantasy and bad fantasy."

THE LITTLE APOCRYPHA

Lionel Fanthorpe, according to his latest book jacket (*The World's Most Mysterious Objects*), is now Magistral Chaplain General and Knight Commander of the Templar Priory of St Mary Magdalene. I don't know whether you can get that one by mail order...

Philip José Farmer was presented with a plaque at a Peoria IL public library on 10 August, celebrating the 50th anniversary of his once controversial alien-sex story "The Lovers" (*Startling Stories*, August 1952) – which helped him win a Hugo in their first year of presentation, as Best New Author.

Christopher Priest is strangely fascinated by the Amazon.co.uk ranking of his alternate history novel *The Separation*, somehow clocking up

hardback sales despite the publisher's decision to avoid tiresome newspaper reviews by furtively releasing it in trade paperback only. "According to Amazon, for a few days at the beginning of August the nonexistent hardcover was outselling the paperback. I was greatly bemused by this. Since then, its sales have slipped steadily downwards... Now, in an attempt to beef up sales a little, Amazon are offering the hardcover *Sep* as a special set, bundled with the paperback." Gosh!

Whitley Strieber's on-line journal warns of what lies in wait for people like himself who fearlessly oppose the world UFO cover-up conspiracy: "What has been happening to me is this: every night as I go to sleep, something begins moving against my skin, creeping like some sort of very slow insect. I have seen and held this object. I have tried to crush it. But I cannot. I cannot get a sample. It seems like a living thing, but I do not believe that it is alive in the same sense that we are. • About a week ago, I woke up and found it penetrated into my chest just above my collarbone. I pulled it out and tried to crush it between my fingers, to gouge it with my fingernail. It struggled furiously in my hand. It would not break up. I turned on the light and sat up, with the intention to take it into the bathroom and capture it in a water glass. But when I relaxed my grip just a little, it disappeared before my eyes..." These are interesting symptoms; I'm trying not to be reminded of the opening of Philip K. Dick's *A Scanner Darkly*.

INFINITELY IMPROBABLE

Even More Awards. *Rhysling Award* for sf poetry... Long: Lawrence Schimel, "How to Make a Human." Short: William John Watkins, "We Die As Angels." • *Gaylactic Spectrum Awards*... Novel: Hugh Nissenson, *The Song of the Earth*. Short: Alexis Glynn Latner, "Kindred." Other: *Bending the Landscape: Horror* ed. Nicola Griffith & Stephen Pagel. • *British Fantasy Awards*... Novel: Simon Clark, *The Night of The Triffids*. Anthology: *The Mammoth Book of Best New Horror 12* ed. Stephen Jones. Collection: Paul Finch, *Aftershocks*. Short: Simon Clark, "Goblin City Lights." Artist: Jim Burns. Small Press: PS Publishing.

Thog's Interviewing Masterclass. An *SFX* freelance who shall remain nameless interviewed Jeffrey Combs about the latest *Re-Animator* sequel, imaginatively entitled *Beyond Re-Animator*. Released 13 years after *Re-Animator II* (1989), the new film is set

13 years later, leading to the enquiry: "Will Combs wear make-up so that West looks older?"

R.I.P. Lloyd Biggle Jr (1923-2002), US author, musicologist and oral historian, who published a number of entertaining sf novels in (especially) the 1960s and '70s, died on 12 September aged 79. His first story appeared in 1954; his most popular books were *Monument* (1974) and the "Jan Darzek" sequence beginning with *All the Colours of Darkness* (1963) and *Watchers of the Dark* (1966). He was a founding SFWA official and also founded the SF Oral History Association in the 1970s. ■ *Robert L. Forward* (1932-2002), US gravitational physicist and author of 11 hard sf novels, died from brain cancer on 21 September; he was 70. He described his sf novel debut *Dragon's Egg* (1980) as "A textbook on neutron star physics disguised as a novel." Bob Forward was a popular and ebullient figure at sf conventions, and would surely have chuckled if he could have seen his polygamous characterization in the *Daily Telegraph* obituary: "Forward, an unmissable sight at science-fiction conventions in his bespoke suit, white shirt and bow tie, and the coloured waistcoats run up by his wife (he had a couple of dozen)..."

Court Circular. Nancy Stouffer's never very convincing plagiarism case against J. K. Rowling didn't just fail on 19 September but rebounded spectacularly. Deciding that Stouffer had naughtily improved the evidence about her creation of Larry Potter and the Muggles, the judge fined her \$50,000 for a "pattern of intentional bad faith conduct," warned her never again to claim that Harry Potter violated her trademark, and ordered her to pay part of Rowling's costs. Oops!

Thog's Masterclass. *Detached Viewpoint Dept.* "Isaac threw up his face and swung it around him, desperately searching for light." (China Miéville, *Perdido Street Station*, 2000.) ■ *Long Division Dept.* "The moment you draw a circle, pi exists. Yet it's entirely irrational. There's no rational answer to the sum 'twenty-two over seven.' You can divide twenty-two by seven for ever but you never get a real definite answer." (Ian Watson, *Alien Embassy*, 1977) • *Dept of Pre-Emptive Threats.* "Captain, you will long have known that I consider Mote Prime the greatest threat to humanity since the Dinosaur Killer struck Earth sixty-five million years ago." (Larry Niven & Jerry Pournelle, *The Gripping Hand*, 1993)

The End of Science Fiction's Childhood

Gary Westfahl

To judge by some recent e-mail messages, some people out there seem to believe that I am an expert on children's science fiction.

I suppose this is not entirely irrational; after all, I wrote a book entitled *Science Fiction, Children's Literature, and Popular Culture* and co-edited a book entitled *Nursery Realms: Children in the Worlds of Science Fiction, Fantasy, and Horror*. Further research would uncover other publications on topics related to children's science fiction, including an essay subtitled "On Science Fiction as Children's Literature." Confronted with such evidence, it seems, I would be obliged to confess to some degree of knowledgeable ability in this area.

Even if tempted by egoboo or filthy lucre to do precisely that, however, I cannot honestly portray myself as an expert on children's science fiction. At best, I might admit to some awareness

of what children's science fiction used to be, but not what it is.

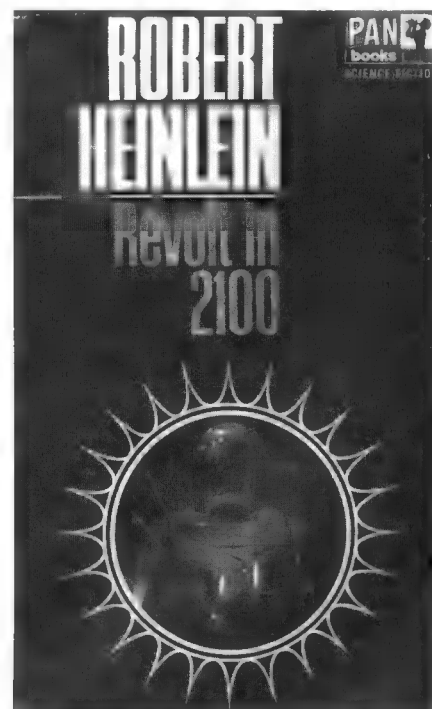
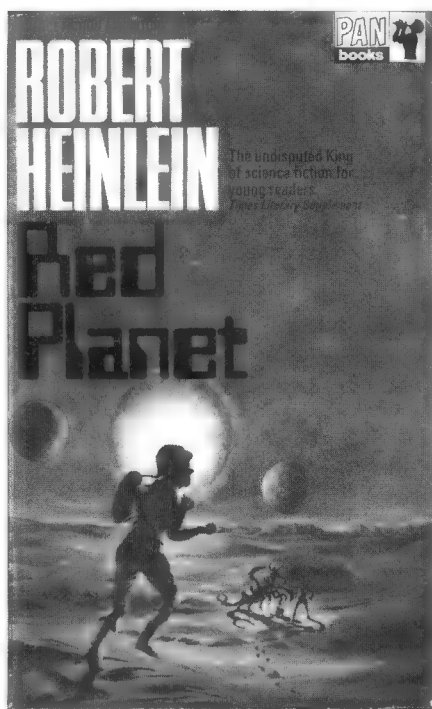
A note on terminology: books for younger readers are commonly divided into three categories for three age groups: "picture books," for ages 0-through-5, featuring elaborate illustrations with captions to be read aloud by adults; "middle school books," for ages 6-through-10, combining lengthier texts for developmental readers with copious illustrations; and "young adult books," for ages 11-through-15, short novels with occasional illustrations. When speaking of "children's science fiction," I will be primarily thinking about science fiction for young adults, the category usually receiving the most attention.

The reason for my chronologically limited knowledge of children's science fiction might be stated this way: when it emerged as a distinct publishing label in the 1950s and 1960s, children's science fiction was primarily a subcategory of science fiction, so I became familiar with it as a science fiction reader and scholar. Today, children's science fiction is primarily a subcategory of children's literature, and hence it rarely comes to my attention.

This shift in classification can be deduced by observing the ways that libraries – American libraries at least – once shelved, and now shelf, their fiction. In the 1950s and 1960s, there was almost invariably a science fiction section – albeit a small one – where children's science fiction was shelved alongside adult science fiction. In one place, young readers could find Robert A. Heinlein's juvenile *Red Planet* and his adult novel *Revolt in 2100* right next to each other. Today, libraries put children's science fiction in their children's section, intermingled with other children's books, so that juvenile science fiction and adult science fiction are far apart. Similar patterns of organization are found in the other

place where today's youth find their reading material, the chain bookstores.

The old system made sense, given where children's science fiction used to come from. Entering the 1950s, the publishers of children's literature faced a predicament: they had become aware of the existence of science fiction, they recognized there was a young audience clamouring for it, but they didn't really understand what it was, and the authors they usually relied on weren't prepared to tackle this new form of writing. So, publishers had to approach adult science fiction writers and hire them to write for younger readers. Heinlein famously produced a series of juveniles for an editor at Scribner's who was alternately baffled and appalled by his products but obliged to publish them due to their tremendous sales. The Winston juveniles recruited noted authors like Poul Anderson, Arthur C.



Clarke, Lester del Rey, Chad Oliver, Jack Vance, and Donald A. Wollheim. Andre Norton proved popular with both younger and older readers for her numerous science fiction juveniles. Isaac Asimov, transparently disguised as "Paul French," chronicled the exploits of heroic Lucky Starr, while Wollheim related the adventures of young astronaut Mike Mars.

However, while science fiction writers were regularly employed to write for children in the 1950s and early 1960s, the market soon shrivelled, for various reasons. The children of the Baby Boom were maturing into rebellious hippies, and not as many children were coming along to replace them, resulting in a general contraction of the children's market. Science fiction authors had unwisely focused too much on near-future stories about the conquest of space that were rapidly overtaken by events; once Yuri Gagarin and John Glenn had actually orbited the Earth, it was hard to muster enthusiasm for fictional accounts of Mike Mars or Tom Swift, Jr. doing the same thing. Moreover, even younger readers, absorbing NASA propaganda about the experienced test pilots with the Right Stuff serving as astronauts, could realistically discern that plucky teenagers with good connections were not going to play a role in exploring space. (To this day, the only person within shouting distance of adolescence even considered as astronaut material was asked to fork over 20 million dollars for the privilege.) As one illustration of the overall shrinkage in the market, the bibliography of Karen Sands and Marietta Frank's *Back in the Spaceship Again: Juvenile Science Fiction Series Since 1945* reveals that the numbers of new science fiction series, plentiful in the 1950s, plummeted in the 1960s and 1970s.

The major problem, however, was that American publishers of children's literature in the 1960s confronted dilemmas far graver than devising ways to maintain the viability of the children's science fiction market. Having perfected formulas for safe, palatable stories that celebrated white maleness and the absolute perfection of all things American, they now struggled to generate new forms of fiction that responded to the newly voiced concerns of women and minority groups, new forms of fiction that would take a more jaundiced look at America's past and present. The entire field of children's literature needed to be revamped, reworked, and updated to match the sensibilities of a revolutionary new era, and with those important tasks at hand, publishers allowed the field of children's science

fiction to stagnate.

During that decade, though, science fiction was becoming more prominent in the media of film and television, and the burgeoning popularity of *Star Trek* reruns in the 1970s, followed by the astounding success of *Star Wars*, alerted publishers to the fact that there were vast new profits to be made in children's science fiction. But this time, there was no need to make phone calls to veteran science fiction writers. The new generation of children's writers already knew what science fiction was, having watched *Star Trek* and *Star Wars*. Correctly or not, they felt perfectly well prepared to write science fiction, if that was what their publishers wanted. So, instead of importing science fiction writers, children's literature began to develop its own – writers like Bruce Coville, H. M. Hoover, William Sleator, Alfred Slote, and others that adult science fiction readers may have never heard of.

I read several of their books as part of my catholic research into the literature of space stations, and I found some were very good, while others were less estimable. To a seasoned science fiction reader, however, they seemed bland mixtures of familiar tropes that provided colourful new backgrounds for timeless tales of teenage angst. They recalled S. E. Hinton more than Robert A. Heinlein, and hence they appeared to be a form of science fiction beyond my expertise.

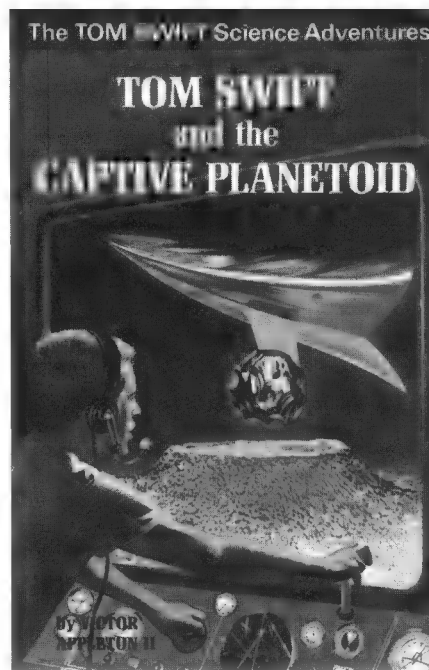
Described in this fashion, the decoupling of science fiction and children's literature can be attributed to a series of unrelated events – demographic shifts, poor authorial

decision-making, significant social changes. But one can also describe this development as a story of abandonment.

Up to this point, I have been ignoring the fact that, well before publishers like Scribner's and Winston transformed children's science fiction into a recognized category of hardcover literature, there were innumerable science fiction books and stories aimed at younger readers – like the Frank Reade, Jr. dime novels, the Great Marvel series, the original Tom Swift series, Carl Claudy's stories for *American Boy* magazine – even if these were rarely welcomed into libraries. More broadly, many science fiction works ostensibly for adult readers were increasingly being aimed at adolescents. Jules Verne's novels were viciously bowdlerized in translation to eliminate his politics and satire, leaving only exciting adventures for the young. The pulp magazines where science fiction achieved its generic identity quickly abandoned editorial pretensions of a broad audience and frankly targeted precocious boys with devices ranging from offers of science kits for subscribers to covers featuring buxom beauties in brass brassières. "Adult" science fiction writers could easily adapt to writing children's science fiction in the 1950s, one might argue, because they had in a sense always been writing for children.

Things began to change in the 1950s, when H. L. Gold's first editorial for *Galaxy* magazine was entitled "For Adults Only" and another new magazine, Anthony Boucher and J. Francis McComas's *The Magazine of Fantasy and Science Fiction*, deliberately set out to publish science fiction that was mature, respectable literature. Science fiction now wished to be taken seriously, and to many that meant that science fiction needed to sever its connections to children and write exclusively and conspicuously for adults. The New Wave of the 1960s took this goal even more seriously, as writers produced works featuring graphic sex, four-letter words, convoluted experimental prose, and other devices designed to exclude young readers as a matter of definition.

There was nothing to prevent science fiction writers in the 1960s and thereafter from continuing to write for children, even if the market was contracting and publishers were less receptive, and a few of them did – as evidenced by Ben Bova's *Exiles* trilogy in the early 1970s and by striking juveniles from Richard A. Lupoff and Vonda N. McIntyre in the early 1980s. But most writers simply weren't interested. While Heinlein could have continued to write and profit from



juveniles like *Podkayne of Mars*, he didn't want to; he preferred to focus on producing books that were longer, more experimental, and more adult. The works of other major writers, while variegated in their approaches, reflected similar ambitions.

Thus, in its aggressive pursuit of adult readers, science fiction had effectively abandoned the children's market. When there developed a renewed interest in children's science fiction, then, publishers found it not only possible, but even necessary, to recruit an entirely new cadre of writers to produce it. And, if these writers weren't exactly attentive to the traditional principles and priorities underlying science fiction, that was only to be expected.

By the 1990s, a number of factors – the visible profitability of the children's market, the ongoing vicissitudes of the adult market, the perceived aging of the science fiction readership – inspired some to lament the genre's longstanding neglect of the young and to take corrective action. They resolved to undo the past, to again recruit science fiction writers to write for children and provide young readers with the best talent available, to effectively produce Winston juveniles for a new generation. Tor Books created the Jupiter Novels for younger readers, with six books by Charles Sheffield, Jerry Pournelle, and James P. Hogan, while Avon Books launched David Brin's *Out of Time* series, with three novels by Roger McBride Allen, Sheila Finch, and Nancy Kress. While these particular series were evidently unsuccessful, with no new items appearing in recent years, Tor has soldiered on with additional juveniles by David Gerrold and John Barnes, though these also appear to be garnering little attention and disappointing sales.

To explain why science fiction books fail to find an audience, one can always call in the usual suspects – inept marketing, inadequate promotion, poor distribution, and the like. Realistically, however, these series were probably doomed from the start, even under the best of circumstances. Decades ago, when the genre of science fiction was young, it could naturally appeal to the young without deliberate effort, because its then-dominant themes of space travel, fabulous new inventions, and unlimited progress were by their very nature exciting, youthful dreams. Today, with its sense of confidence in those old dreams all but shattered, the genre can only hesitantly seek to compete against legions of professional children's writers vastly

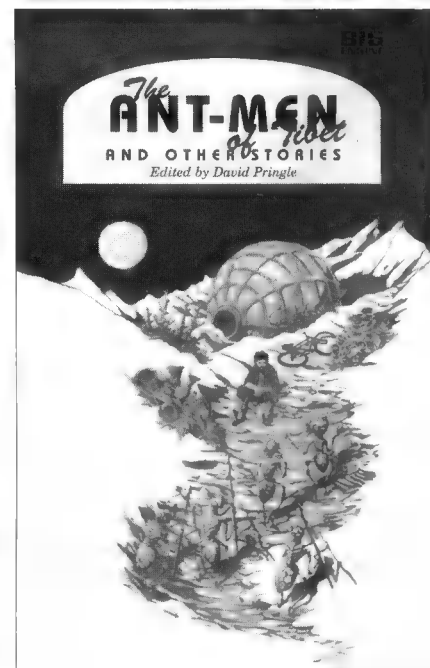
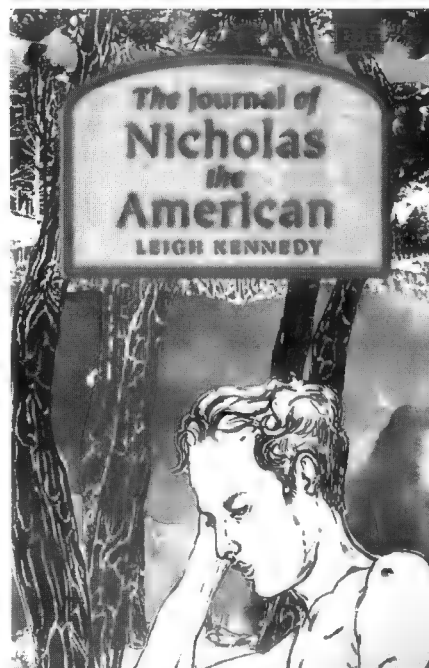
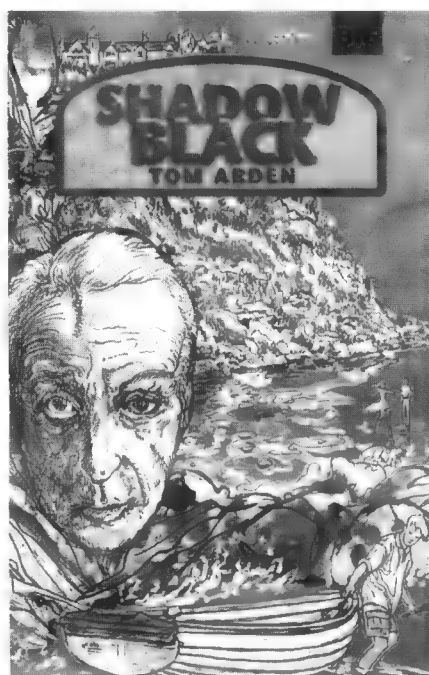
more experienced in appealing to the young. In the face of their slick confections about alien teachers and Young Jedi Knights, it seems obvious in retrospect that recycled 1950s juveniles about troubled teens in space weren't going to achieve massive popularity. Still, struggling writers of all varieties often seek refuge in replicating the patterns of previous successes, and this should inspire sympathy more than reprobation. Sheffield's and Brin's hearts were in the right place, even if their products seemed a bit stale.

Anyone can articulate what is needed: fresh, imaginative, vigorous science fiction for younger readers that will relegate the formulaic fodder of the children's science fiction industry to the remainder tables and recruit hordes of new fans to the genre. But whether the old dog of science fiction can teach itself such new tricks remains an open question, and this aging non-expert on children's science fiction can offer no suggestions.

Gary Westfahl

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AND OTHER MONSTERS

MEDIA COMMENTARY BY EVELYN LEWIS

Not being impervious to the comments that are often passed in the letter columns of this magazine, I take seriously the point that it would be better if I reviewed things that I like. It must be fairly apparent that there are things I like – having given rave notices to *Dune*, *Buffy: The Vampire Slayer*, *Earth: Final Conflict*, *Andromeda* and *Dark Angel*, and qualified approval to the likes of *Farscape* and its dark twin *Lexx*, I think it must be obvious where my sympathies lie. Equally, having sat through the whole of the repeat of *Babylon 5* on the Sci-Fi Channel, and having debated it long and hard with friends who are hardened fans, I can see there is some merit in their viewpoints, but at the bottom of the argument is the plain fact that *Babylon 5* doesn't convince as drama.

Now, to an extent, a drama will only convince those who are prepared to buy in to the scenario to begin with. Sometimes this is mistakenly described as the willing suspension of disbelief. What Coleridge intended by the phrase was similar, but he was talking about realistic fiction which

we know didn't happen, but could well have. He was attempting to capture the sense of accepting something that we know to be untrue but is perfectly plausible. He was not talking about accepting ham actors saying wooden lines in silly rubber masks either as true aliens or as metaphors for human beings. "Buying in" to a scenario involves an acceptance that some things which are just plain ludicrous will be accepted as fact for the term of the entertainment. I can buy in to *Buffy:TVS* because the acting is superb and the stories are primarily concerned with human relationships and emotions. The often risible demons, vampires and monsters can usually be ignored or at least accepted as concretizations of some of the more nightmare real-world concerns of the characters, as well as the butt of some of Buffy's more James-Bond-like witticisms at their demises.

Equally, I can buy in to some of the movie length modern retold fairy tales that have been appearing on Hallmark recently. It is not the retelling of the stories per se that is interesting,

but the way they have been repositioned to serve an early 21st-century sensibility. This might not suit the more robust science fiction fan, but it is exactly the sort of thing that appeals to me in televisual entertainment. (If the editor permits, I would like to spend a future column telling you about the splendours of *McLeod's Daughters*, whose second series has just ended on Hallmark. This is plainly not fantastic fiction in any way, shape or form, but uses many of the tropes of sf to tell its story. Watch out for it on terrestrial television in two years time: it is about to launch in America, and if it succeeds as I expect it to, the mice that buy television in this country will eventually be compelled to buy it for the masses – but, as with *Dark Angel*, only after it is safely finished.)

Ten years ago, a marvellous illustrated lost world fantasy book by James Gurney called *Dinotopia* was published by, of all people, Dorling Kindersley. It was a joy, with some of the most beautiful artwork I had ever

seen, and a wonderful non-violent narrative where the adventure lay purely in the discovery of all the details of a world where dinosaurs and humans had evolved to live in harmony side by side. I have often wondered what happened to Gurney's vision. I vaguely remember seeing a paperback called something like *Return to Dinotopia* but it was the visual feast that I so craved. Mere words would have been a disappointment. So it was with a great deal of anticipation and trepidation that I sat down to watch *Dinotopia*, what I thought was a film adaptation of it on Sky One recently. Unfortunately, in every way, the film was a curate's egg. To correct my initial misprision, it was in fact the extended pilot of a new series, presumably designed to cash in on the apparent success of *Lost World* and its ilk. To accommodate turning it into a series, where the original book has the story as the adventure of a man and his son shipwrecked on the shores of Dinotopia, the series has the father lost and his two sons, one good and one dark, having the discovery adventures.

Where the film is good, it is astonishingly good. The animation, as has come to be usual in such stories, is by the Henson Creature Shop, but the amount of work that went into animating some of the scenes must have been prodigious – for some of the set pieces in the book, huge double page spreads of marvellously detailed painting that remind one of the diabolically complex 5,000-piece jigsaw puzzles given to us at Christmas when we were young, are reproduced here in the most exact detail with the added complication that it is all in motion. The first entry into a Dinotopian city marketplace astride the back of a brontosaurus is a remarkable television spectacle. But the tour-de-force is the vision of Waterfall City, every bit

as awesome in the film as in the book, and with added zoom and pan and motion.

Regrettably, where the film is bad, it is awful. It may be my memory, but the parts of the film that impress are the parts that follow the book. The parts that appall are the bits that have been added on. It has become a bore commenting on bad acting, but here I have to wonder whether or not it is the script that is bad. The binary opposite brothers have already been mentioned, but other introductions are equally unwelcome, and the scene where the brothers are introduced to the assembled populace of Waterfall City is an extraordinary achievement of pompous, portentuous vacuity. It is called Dinotopia to evoke *Utopia*, but in the modern sense, of a paradise. To be sure, there is a world beneath that is explored in the book, but it is not the dark or fearsome place hinted at here, but merely the dinosaur equivalent of heaven. It seems that raw cliché can overcome even the most elegant of visions, and the overpowering feel of this first episode was of a brave effort to evoke the charm of the book in order to get us to buy in to what has every promise to be just one more battle between good and evil. Ho hum.

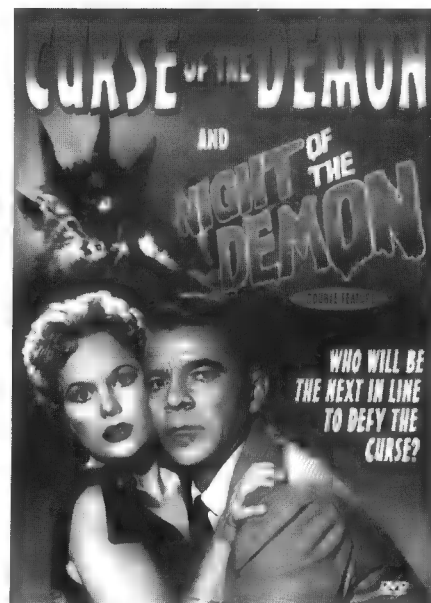
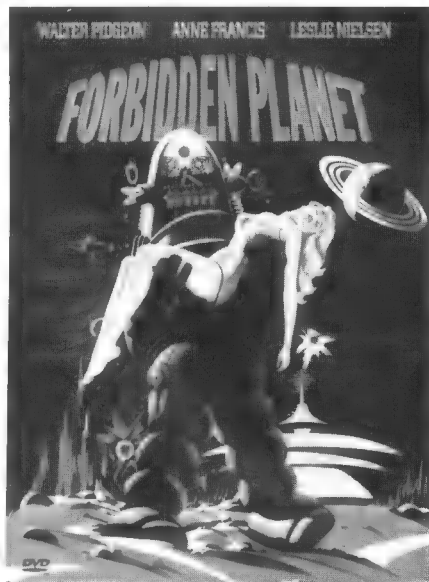
Mention of *Dark Angel* earlier brought an angry flush to my brow. Regular readers will recall that a DVD release of the first series is something profoundly craved by this commentator. Visit Amazon.com, type in "James Cameron's *Dark Angel*", and you will be presented with a message that says that the makers have no plans to release it at the moment, but Amazon is trying to get it released. Nothing at all shows up on Amazon.co.uk, but if you type the same into Google, it will take you to a .co.uk site that no longer exists. Google's cache of the site shows news that tells us that *Dark Angel* will be released on DVD in November 2002. It appears to have been suppressed. And yet, as I write, the Collector's Edition Boxed Set of Season One is sold out, and of Season Two is almost sold out, and individual DVDs of pairs of episodes from the entirety of both series are freely available – in Japan! They are also available in Germany and France, but those web sites don't provide helpful English translations like the Japanese one. Bizarrely, the set is apparently also available in Australia, but I couldn't get any sense out of any of the sites down under.

Why on Earth should this be? In the UK, certainly, *Dark Angel* has recently begun its first run on a national terrestrial channel, albeit only on the quasi-available Channel 5 (it is not as widely broadcast as the other four

channels, and indeed where I live it is only available on cable or satellite, where you would have Sky One and the Sci-Fi Channel and thus would have seen all the shows two years before anyway). Can it be that part of the deal with Channel 5 included delaying the DVD release in the UK? And what possible reason could there be to suppress it in the USA, where it has already been shown and has a large fan base, unless it is that the show it appears to have been cancelled in favour of, *Firefly*, is fearful of the competition that it might offer? Give me *Dark Angel* on DVD and I promise I'll shut up about it.

Travelling even further back in time, I have recently acquired two of my favourite films ever at last on DVD. *Forbidden Planet* (1956) was released quite recently in a deluxe edition in the USA, and what a joy it was at last to see it in the form that I originally saw it in the cinema. Of course, it has been shown on television, but there it is always cropped to 4:3 proportions, and older televisions really didn't do the colours or the stunning visuals justice. (A word of warning: this edition is double-sided, and in lieu of the usual DVD extras that appear to be *de rigueur* nowadays, on the other side its producers have seen fit to include this 4:3 cropped version. I had never seen a double-sided DVD before, and was more than a little disconcerted the second time I tried to watch it to find that the edges had mysteriously disappeared. They're back now.)

Now this is a film that you have to buy in to, or it will easily seem risible. For those not aware, *Forbidden Planet* is a retelling of Shakespeare's *The Tempest*, and it is remarkably faithful to the original story. Prospero becomes Morbius, a professor of



Philology, stranded on the planet Altair 4 when the rest of the crew died trying to leave. His daughter becomes Altaira, and she is either a congenital flirt, or knows more about men than she claims. One of the great delights of this film is her unconscious slighting of the men who come courting. Ariel translates into Robbie the Robot, and Caliban becomes the night-stalking invisible Monster from the Id.

If the film has a weakness, it is that the crew of the spaceship are rather more of the World War II US Navy type than strictly necessary, although it is easy to see how this could have been thought an advantage in 1956 when the film was made. On the other hand, if it weren't already common knowledge that this is the film that inspired Gene Rodenberry to create *Star Trek*, this exact quasi-military space-going Navy would have had a million scholarly pens scratching out theses pointing out the extraordinary similarities.

Given the undoubted status of this movie as a forebear of one of the most successful television series, quite apart from its own merits, it is to be hoped that this classic of science fiction movies will be released in the UK soon. It is unlikely anyone would be disappointed by it.

On the subject of extraordinary similarities, I discover that my other favourite film, *The Night of the*

Demon, has a scene that is uncommonly reminiscent of *Forbidden Planet*, while the overall tale is also similar. As it was made in 1957, where *Forbidden Planet* was made in 1956, it is possible that it was inspired by *FP*, or it might simply be that the mood of the time was demanding such stories (much as nowadays feisty feminine heroines are everywhere – *Buffy*, *Relic Hunter*, *Alias*, *Dark Angel*, etc.). Of course, much like *Forbidden Planet*, *The Night of the Demon* is based on a classic from literature, in this case M.R. James's "Casting the Runes," which is arguably the best of its canon, as was *The Tempest*. As with *FP*, the story here is essentially a retelling of the same basic story, but in this case in a contemporary setting, and it is strange that all the things we thought were modern in 1957 England look equally as quaint as the far-fetched futuristic hardware of *Forbidden Planet*.

Again, in the absence of anything very much to put on the DVD as extras to justify the high price, the producers have supplied us with the American release of the film, *The Curse of the Demon*. Watching the two back to back it is plain that, first, the American print they were working from had faded much more than the English version, so all the moody chiaroscuro of the darkened screen is to a large extent lost in shades of pearly grey – it's about as horrifying as watching Frankie

Howard in *The Runaway Bus*. The real difference is that the US version is nine minutes shorter, and the cuts that have been made are largely of the quirky bits of English characterfulness that make this so much more than just a horrific film in its original version.

These two films are among my earliest memories of visual entertainment and surely stamped their influence on my young mind, so that even now I am only really happy in the presence of a spooky supernatural story, or one that features sensible, worked-out scientific methodology, or soaring spaceships and planets. Each of these movies has two of the above: Dana Andrews's character in *The Night of the Demon* is a psychologist intent on debunking the mystical nonsense of mediums and magic that turn out to be only too real to their practitioners, while *Forbidden Planet* features an apparently natural force of the planet that cannot be overcome by brute force but is finally controlled by understanding (and great painted backdrops, and a super flying saucer); so it is no surprise that I can't recommend them highly enough. Buy a DVD player and a decent telly, and get hold of them somehow. You'll have to buy in to really enjoy them, but it will be worth it. Then roll on *Dark Angel* on DVD in the UK.

Evelyn Lewes

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Novels are the usual route to making a name in the sf field, but Ted Chiang soared to star status with his first published story, the brilliant "Tower of Babylon," which won a 1990 Nebula award. Following that, Chiang published sparsely – although earning more awards – and in fact at one point he appeared to have given up writing altogether for several years. *Stories of Your Life and Others* (Tor, \$24.95) collects all his fiction, in chronological order of publication: a grand total of eight stories. Going by the publishing information here, Chiang's career falls into two phases: three of the stories are from 1990-91, after which there's a hiatus until 1998. On the evidence presented here, it's very good news for us that he resumed writing.

The lead story is the reputation-forging, Nebula-winning "Tower of Babylon," which draws evocatively on the Babel myth to detail the building of a tower that can reach all the way up to the vault of heaven. It's still powerful and resonant, and it's easy to understand why it propelled its author to a place in the sf firmament. "Understand" ventures into *Flowers for Algernon* territory to chart the birth and exponential development of a supermind. It's no easy task to make a superior mentality not only credible but compelling, yet Chiang succeeds admirably. So it's disturbing to learn that in an earlier incarnation this, the oldest story here, was rejected more than once before finally seeing print. Of course it's conceivable that the previous version was markedly inferior in some way to this one but, comparing it with much of the short fiction published these days (yea, even unto the best-of anthologies!), I was left to wonder what other strong stories we've missed out on because their author never went on to achieve big-time recognition.

"Division by Zero" is a double-stranded tale of a married couple, and the impact on their love and lives of some esoteric mathematics. Placed among the higher-octane stories here, it seems rather low-key. Nevertheless it is subtly structured and manages to deliver a strong emotional punch. Still, the most moving story in the collection is "Story of Your Life," which effortlessly blends linguistic speculation with tragedy to show how establishing communication with aliens leads to someone knowing far, far too much about what is to come. In "Seventy-Two Letters," Chiang takes the old, now risible, idea that every organism existed fully-formed in the germ cells of its parents and combines it with the familiar notion of the golem to generate a richly imagined alternate history. It's fascinating stuff, but what's missing from this *tour de force* of invention is a story involving enough to do justice to the imagina-

Reputation Forging

Neil Jones

tive "what-if" content.

The shortest story here has one of the longest titles, "The Evolution of Human Science," which Chiang reinstated: the editors (of *Nature*, the science journal, who commissioned it) preferred "Catching Crumbs from the Table." Thematically, the story is a companion piece to "Understand," which some editors bounced. Here, though, having read the story, I'd go with the editors (although I'd drop the unwieldy "Catching"): their title is the more effective, memorable and indeed poignant.

"Hell is the Absence of God" once again starts with a bold notion as story-seed – this time that God exists and Christianity is demonstrably true – and then beanstalks it remorselessly into a universe where, after death, people really do end up either in Heaven

or Hell and where angelic visitations can occur, bringing miraculous cures or afflictions seemingly at random. The central character can't love God and therefore will go to Hell – which is not much of a problem (because Hell doesn't sound that much different from everyday life) until his adored wife (who can and does love Him) dies and goes to Heaven, which means he can't ever be reunited with her... unless, somehow, he can learn to love God. It's a desperately neat dilemma, and as this story has just won a Hugo award I was expecting a lot from it and I'd really like to say how much it moved me. But it didn't. Although imaginatively well up to Chiang's high standard, it never engaged me emotionally. You win some, you lose some.

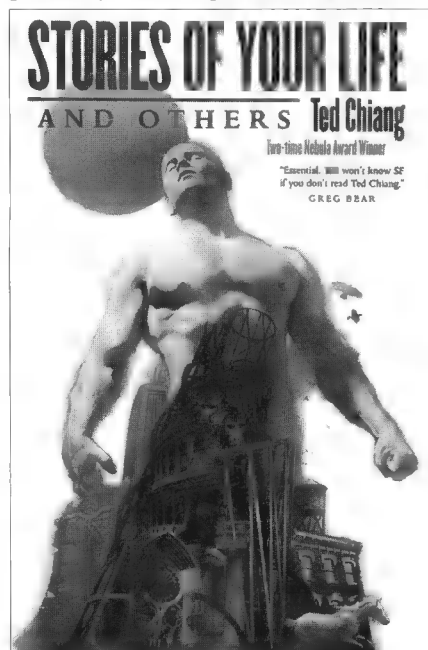
Last up, and written especially for this collection, is the long story "Likening What You See: A Documentary." Here the what-if is calliagnosia, artificially induced suppression of our recognition of the physical beauty of individuals. Chiang deftly animates the implications of his bright idea and also makes us feel for how "calli" affects the lives of his characters.

That's not quite all. There's also an afterword where Chiang comments briefly on each story, which is common enough in collections these days, and it's something that can irritate or intrigue: for me, it's definitely the latter, and here, given not only the high standard but also the sheer originality of the stories concerned, it's especially welcome.

Overall, this is a remarkable collection. Every story amply repays the investment put into reading it and is likely to stand the test of time and be worth rereading. So, if you like the sf short story, this book is well worth your money.



REVIEWED



Meanwhile, at the novel-length end of the sf spectrum, Ben Jeapes, who has paid his dues in the short-sf field with some solid stories, gives us *The Xenocide Mission* (David Fickling Books, £10.99), the latest instalment, apparently, in an ongoing, decidedly Nivenesque, future-history series – but if, like me, you haven't read the earlier volume (*His Majesty's Starship*), no problem, since this book stands comfortably alone. As the novel opens, a benign human-alien interstellar power, the Commonwealth (yep, Jeapes is a Brit), is monitoring the solar system of the eponymous XCs, who have previously attacked an adjacent planet and exterminated its sentient inhabitants. The Commonwealth space station is destroyed in a devastating XC surprise attack. The only survivors are young inexperienced Lieutenant Joel Gilmore and a Rustie, one of the stolid aliens that partner humans in the Commonwealth. Thereafter plotlines intertwine various viewpoints: Gilmore; Gilmore's retired dad (who helped found the Commonwealth but then, and in retrospect unwisely, dealt himself out of the power structure); and the XCs. The Gilmores are well-intentioned, noble, etc, as is the Commonwealth, but there are a few human black hats to stir the plot-pot.

I had a couple of problems with Jeapes's Commonwealth: firstly, in believing that the partnership between a handful of humans and a lot of profoundly unassertive Rusties could actually work in practice; and secondly, in working up much interest in the Rusties themselves, who clocked in on the worthy-but-dull side. Also, given their prominence in the narrative, I could have done with sharper word-portraits of them and the several other baroque but distinctly under-

visualized alien races. On the plus side, Jeapes puts most of his xenobiological effort into the XCs, who, fortunately, were easier to bring into mental focus and also a lot of fun.

Overall, this is a fast-paced retro-sf yarn, which reads like a collaboration between two past sf masters, Larry Niven and James White. It's smoothly written and there's enough gadding

about alien solar systems to keep the pages windmilling cheerily past, although the resolution did seem rather too convenient to be quite believable. The conclusion points the way towards further exploration of this complex future history and, on the strength of this book, it might be worth sticking along for the ride.

Neil Jones

Masters, Magicians and Moon Landings

Paul Beardsley

Stephen Baxter's *Phase Space* (Voyager, £17.99) is a collection of 25 short stories, eight of which first appeared in *Interzone*. Its cover design recalls the recent "Manifold" trilogy, and readers of those novels will recognize recurring themes, situations and characters. In particular, astronaut Reid Malenfant makes his presence felt throughout, sometimes as a cameo or in linking material.

The opening story, "Moon-Calf," features several familiar themes: an ageing ex-astronaut, pessimism about the future of the space programme, and thoughts about earlier sf and proto-sf writers – I was delighted to read about an H. G. Wells theme pub in Hereford! Despite the downbeat tone, this one left me with a warm feeling. "Open Loops" features another trademark Baxterism – altered humans living on worlds that are not planets. These worlds are made from ice asteroids – membrane-wrapped globes of water a few miles across. Characteristically, Baxter explores the far-future consequences of this development.

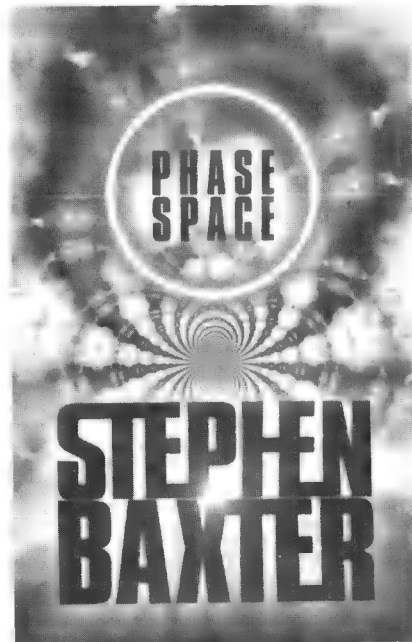
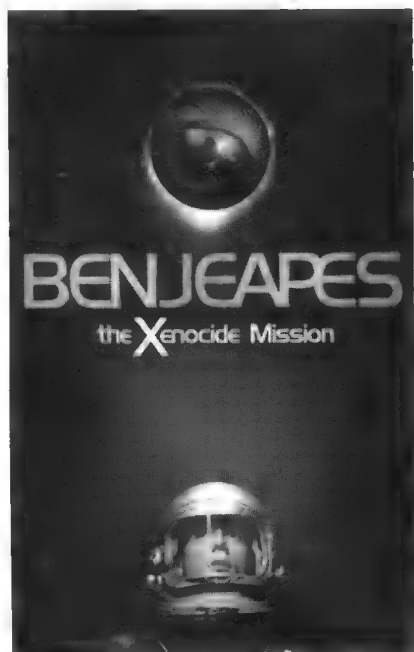
"Poyekhali 3201" re-examines the achievement of Yuri Gagarin to good effect. "War Birds" is the first of several moon-landing "what ifs?"; this one explores the political consequences of an allegedly sabotaged Apollo 11 mission. I preferred "Spindrift," in which it is revealed that a lone cosmonaut reached the moon in 1965 – four years before Apollo 11 – on a one-way flight. As Baxter demonstrates, it's surprising how much potential there is in the moon landings – there's even a gay take on the subject in the moving "Sun-Drenched."

The alien race in "Sun-Cloud" is interesting enough; the actual characters (named Sun-Cloud, Orange-Dawn and Cold-Current) are somewhat less engaging. The similar "The We Who Sing" is likewise filled with alien cyphers. Neither really work as stories; nor does "Grey Earth," which might have made an interesting specu-

lative article about Neandertals. "Sheena 5" – the sad story of a space-faring squid – works well enough in its own right, but has too much in common with the novel *Time* (i.e. whole pages of near-identical text). "Huddle" is sadder still, mainly because its post-human protagonist is so innocent.

Ten consecutive stories consider the Fermi paradox – if there are aliens, why aren't they here? They're good but they're too similar to each other. I'd certainly recommend the collection, but would not advise reading it all in one go. On the other hand the penultimate story draws in the many threads, and the final one – an enjoyable piece about timeline-crossing – serves as an epilogue. One is left with the impression that one has finished an occasionally hard-going but immensely satisfying novel.

The Longest Way Home by Robert Silverberg (Gollancz, trade pb, £10.99) is a short, rite-of-passage novel. It's set on Homeworld, a planet



colonized twice by humans: first the Folk, then the Masters. Fifteen-year-old Master Joseph is visiting relatives on another continent when the Folk rebel. He escapes the ensuing massacre, and has to make his own way home – assuming he still has a home, given that the rebellion was widespread. Along the way he is helped and hindered by the inscrutable Indigenes, encounters strange alien beasts, learns to question his own beliefs, and generally has to fight for survival.

With its simple plot and rambling narrative, the book feels a tad over-long even at 213 pages. There are no chapter breaks or even major paragraph breaks, despite scene changes and pauses in the action. It should probably be marketed as a juvenile, despite some sex scenes. All in all, an enjoyable book, but a strangely ordinary one.

On the audio books front, Anton Lesser returns to read the second of Philip Pullman's Sally Lockhart novels, *The Shadow in the North* (BBC Cover to Cover, 6 Cassettes, 9 hrs 30 min). It's somewhat longer than the first book, *The Ruby in the Smoke*, and unlike Ruby, it does count as borderline fantasy – this time, the (slight) supernatural elements are real. It's a pity they're introduced via a séance sequence – the "fake medium who might have real powers after all" is a cliché on a par with the "real murder that takes place during a murder weekend" chestnut. But this is a minor complaint – more serious is the level of coincidence, as two friends independently stumble upon the machinations of the evil Bellmann.

Nevertheless it's good stuff. Once again there are sinister goings-on in Victorian London, and elsewhere in the Empire. There's a stage magician pursued by assassins, a beautiful sad woman with a secret, and some very brutal individuals – including one who will sink ships to conceal his plans for a new kind of steam engine. But this is not just another adventure for Sally Lockhart. Major upheavals occur in the characters' lives, and the story ends with the realization that nothing is ever going to be the same again.

There's a phenomenon I've noticed with Doctor Who fans – something I'll call Who Allowance Syndrome, or W.A.S. – whereby they will overlook blemishes in their beloved series that they would never dream of tolerating in anything else. I suffer from W.A.S., but only slightly. For instance, when the Hartnell Doctor's companion Barbara Wright encounters Aztecs in 15th-century Mexico, I have no problem with her communicating with them in English.

This is just as well, because *The Aztecs* (BBC Worldwide, £19.99) is probably the best of all the surviving Doctor Who stories. Barbara is passionate about Aztec culture, and by a remarkable stroke of luck has found herself in a position of power at the heart of their empire. She wants to phase out their unpleasant habit of human sacrifice before Cortez arrives, despite the Doctor's warning that you can't change history. It's top-notch sf drama, and it's been released on DVD (having been cleaned up by Steve Roberts's legendary Restoration Team) along with a host of extras – including one extra that is clearly a satire on the whole "extras" mentality.

The Enemy of the World (BBC Worldwide Ltd, 2 CDs, 2 hrs 25 min, £13.99) is a Doctor Who story that survives as audio only, with Frazer Hines narrating. Patrick Troughton stars both as the Doctor and the Bond-style villain Salamander. Appropriately the story features helicopter and hovercraft chases, a plot to convince an underground community that there's a nuclear war raging above ground, and some suspicious "natural" disasters. It's slow-moving in places, but great when it gets going. Just don't scrutinize the plot too closely.

Lloyd Rose returns to the Eighth Doctor Who book range, following her impressive debut with the New Orleans-based *City of the Dead* in 2001. *Camera Obscura* (BBC Worldwide, pb, £5.99), set in Victorian England, slightly resembles Pullman's *The Shadow in the North* – including, alas, that séance cliché. The plot is concerned with a time machine that – for some insufficiently explored reason – splits people, resulting in multiple personalities in one body or, in the case of stage magician Octave, one

personality in eight bodies.

Octave uses his misfortune as part of his act, in which he steps into one of eight boxes, then appears to emerge from another. Now, being largely immune to W.A.S., I have no problem with the fantastic element, but I just don't see this wowing an audience – even in Victorian times they must have had more spectacular acts than this. Yet even Maskelyne is blown away by it, and despite his investigations he singularly fails to discover that the eight Octaves have to make their separate ways home each evening.

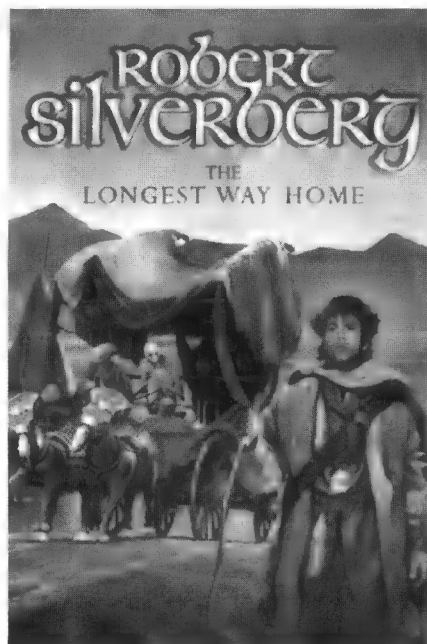
When the Doctor offers to help the Octaves, they naturally murder him in a ludicrous manner. Only he doesn't die of course. This prompts a lengthy magic-realist sequence that adds absolutely nothing to the plot. We learn that the time machine, if used again, will destroy the world or universe (I forget which). So the (by now) twice-murdered Doctor and his morally ambiguous rival Sabbath team up to save the day. The interaction between the TARDIS crew and Sabbath is enjoyable, and the prose is good too, but the novel reads like an early draft submitted in haste. Lloyd Rose is capable of much better.

I found little to like in Justin Richards's *Time Zero* (BBC Worldwide, £5.99). There's a bloke who quotes Whitman before killing people on the slightest pretext, and reams of wodge scientific exposition. I don't mind a bit of wodge scientific exposition when the author knows his or her subject, but *Time Zero* had me chewing the carpet.

The latest Doctor Who novella from Telos Publishing Ltd (www.telos.co.uk) is *Ghost Ship* by Keith Topping (£25 for the deluxe edition, £10 for the standard edition). This sees Tom Baker's Doctor land on the haunted ship *Queen Mary* in 1963. I was pleasantly surprised by the standard of writing in this one, given that Topping's work has failed to impress me in the past. The trouble is, we know there are only two possible outcomes: either the ship really is haunted (which would contradict the rest of the series) or there's some unsatisfying "rational" explanation. Still, it's an enjoyable read, and the introduction by Hugh Lamb – a short essay about haunted ships – is worth a look.

I recently heard that the BBC have withdrawn Telos's licence to publish Doctor Who novellas. This, together with the halving of production of the BBC's own Doctor Who novels, suggests that the series is finally being wound down. Given that the books have been going for more than a decade, they have, with rare exceptions, failed to attract authors of real imaginative talent, so perhaps it's time to let the series rest in peace.

Paul Beardsley



Trilogies, by their very nature, are compromises. The intelligent reader craves if not closure then at least resolution of a story.

Publishers, on the other hand, crave continuity – they want someone who bought *one* book to come back and buy *another* book, and then another – and appear to have come to the conclusion that if readers are too dimwitted to recall the authors of the books they have enjoyed, they might at least remember the characters (thus also discounting we poor benighted souls who might seek something *different* from what they read last). Publishers thus encourage their authors to feature the same characters in series of novels, and authors from Piers Anthony to Anthony Powell have built a reputation on just such series.

Of course, serial novels have been with us for a long time – Dickens' novels were largely written as partworks – and many writers thereof have gloried in writing the kind of standalone novel they want while paying lip service to fitting it into an overarching whole – Terry Pratchett and his Discworld books springs to mind.

The problems appear to occur when writers just want to write singleton novels, with a new set of characters every time, while the publisher wants a nice long series that they can then repackage in matched boxes (who hasn't seen those fine shelf fillers, the Waverley Novels, in their uniform editions at some time in a bookshop?). A compromise appears to be reached where the publisher says, "well, at least write a trilogy for us," – we might call this the logic of trilogies, or "trilogy" – and the poor browbeaten author finally gives in, becomes a trilofactor, and then suffers the awful fate of mid-volume wilt. They didn't want to write their story this way – they've got a great opening, a nicely structured plot, and a stunning and satisfying ending – but they've somehow got to break this up into three novels. Inevitably, the middle volume, having no real beginning or ending, can sometimes appear to be lame.

But it doesn't have to be that way. A milkmaid always uses a three-legged stool to milk a cow because a three-legged stool is the most stable seat for uneven ground. It takes a novelist of the stature of Gwyneth Jones to exploit the trilogy structure in this way rather than appearing limited by it, and with *Castles Made of Sand* (Gollancz, £17.99), the second volume of her Hendrix trilogy, she shows her mettle and turns in a first-class singleton novel that nevertheless stands solidly with the first, and bodes well for a properly satisfying resolution in the third.

The great problem for the reviewer here is to try not to second guess the

The Trilogy and the Novella – Exercises in Storytelling

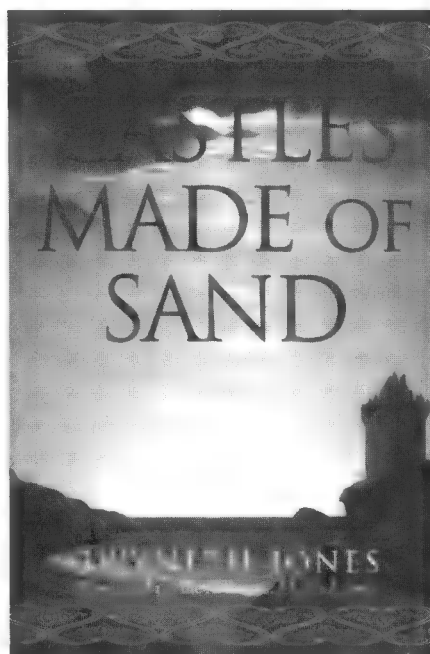
Paul Brazier

author's intentions in the final volume. But Jones deploys the trilogy structure to such remarkable effect that it is difficult not to speculate. In the first novel, *Bold As Love*, we were introduced to a near-future, near-anarchistic Britain that is nevertheless recognizably descended from the one we inhabit – all the structures of government and civil order are there, but they are creaking. We also meet a trio of lead characters whose destiny it appears to be to lead the country through the dark ages and into a golden future. In this second novel, society collapses and effectively anarchy exists, despite an overt appearance of normality. It might be that the

Marxist dialectic process of thesis, antithesis, and synthesis is being structured into these three novels, and if that is so then we can expect the final novel to be represent some kind of synthesis/resolution of these two very different scenarios. Cleverly, however, the thesis and the antithesis each provide a sensible structure for a single novel in which we can explore their aspects as they affect the characters. Likewise, the synthesis might be explored in the final novel, but given all the surprises in the first two, it would be silly to try to anticipate what that synthesis might consist of.

Of course, given the postulated Rock 'n' Roll Reich of this book, it is necessary to draw the central characters in terms of the Rock 'n' Roll lifestyle familiar from newspapers, and what we are treated to is a remarkable amount of substance abuse, and a remarkable exploration of a three-way sexual relationship. Obviously this relationship is between the three central characters, but it would be impossible to discuss the details without revealing large amounts of the plot. Suffice it to say that where the first book features an unbalanced relationship between the three, this one features a much more equal relationship. A natural progression is implied that the trilogy will end with the trio unbalanced in some other direction, but that is perhaps the fault of this reviewer's inept account. The relationship, while becoming fully three-way in this book, also exhibits all of the tensions that we would expect from three highly intelligent and focused human beings attempting to share emotions with no previous role models to give guidance and trying to hold their society together at the same time. As with the social background, it seems likely that the third book will bring further changes that are at once as interesting, as challenging, and as surprising as the ones we have seen thus far.

This multiple trilogy structure demands a third theme to follow on the personal and the social/political. This reviewer hasn't discovered one at the moment. Perhaps it will all become clear when the third novel appears. Tentatively titled *The Burning of the Midnight Lamp*, it should appear next summer. Meantime, lest the reader is left with the impression that Jones has created a *coldly* intellectual tour-de-force, it must be pointed out that she can deliver a punch under the heart when you are least expecting it, and her quoting of a line from the Hendrix song that gives the novel its title as a simple line of dialogue – "What happened to the sweet love you and me had" – is at once a perfect example of how to use such a quote – if you don't recognize it,



it doesn't matter, because the resonance is there in the words themselves – and a startlingly powerful evocation of the long ago youth that for many of us is epitomized by Jimi Hendrix's music.

The first book I read of Paul Cornell's was a part of a trilogy that helped establish the Virgin Books Doctor Who New Adventures series. Since then he has produced several fine stand-alone novels within that series, and when ultimately the BBC decided to claw back the rights and continue to publish the books themselves, he invented a companion for the Doctor, Professor Bernice Surprise Summers, or Benny, who was then successfully spun off into a new line from Virgin to replace the Dr Who books. Benny lives on in the books and audio dramas from Big Finish and Cornell is closely involved with these. However, under consideration here is his second novel in his own right for Gollancz. **British Summertime** (Gollancz, £17.99) follows on in the mood of his other novels, but here, as in his previous *Something More*, he does rather overindulge in his taste for multiple beginnings, and it can be very hard to get going in both books for this reason. Persistence, however, pays off. If you have the time and the patience to pay close attention to what is happening to who in which timeline, you end up with a very clear picture of the multiple jumping-off points and why they are needed, and the story that unfolds is really quite breathtaking.

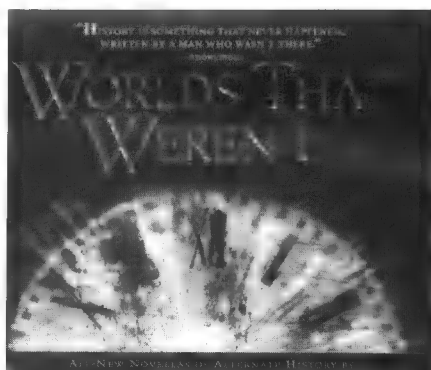
Here we have a parallel future where money means nothing, a jolly mustachioed WWII RAF-fighter-pilot type, a talking severed head (there's one of those in *Castles Made of Sand* too – is this current idea of the year?) and a very strong sense in the more-or-less here-and-now parts of the book that the author is struggling to fit conventional Christianity into his boggingly imagined versions of the world (including a harrowing examination of the biblical phrase, "If thine eye offend thee, pluck it out!"). The breadth of the imagining is an achievement on its own. What he does with the story is strange and surprising, and the whole story comes to a properly reconciled conclusion – these characters, much though we grow to like their company through this book, are finished with. This book stands alone, without a sniff of "trilogy," and makes me look forward to what new friends he will choose to introduce me to in the next.

John Whitbourn is another author condemned to trilofaction by his publisher. The Downs-Lord trilogy started out very well with *Downs-Lord Dawn*, but feels as if it has been forced



to a conclusion too soon. In the first book, we are introduced to the parallel world where the Null are the dominant life form and human beings are meat animals that live in burrows, rather akin to rabbits. The second volume, *Downs-Lord Day*, took our intrepid heroes to Paris on an uneasy diplomatic mission to the King of the Null, who have organized in response to the rise of humanity and thus has arisen a condition of armed peace where each side respects the power of the other, but also holds the persons of their enemies in utter contempt, and would, in a moment, kill them given the opportunity.

The third and final volume, *Downs-Lord Doomsday* (Earthlight, £6.99), takes our protagonists out of their own house under siege from their human enemies to the Isle of Wight



HARRY
TURTLEDOVE
S. M.
STIRLING
MARY
GENTLE
WALTER JON
WILLIAMS

where all the wizards have vanished, to Egypt, and the Valley of the Kings, where the final revelation of the true nature of the world they inhabit is vouchsafed them. The central characters, Guy Ambassador and his wife Bathsheba, are only introduced in the second book – the first has much more of the feel of a Whitbourn stand-alone novel such as *A Dangerous Energy* – but become the mode and medium of the final solution. Whitbourn's wry sense of humour is sometimes lost in the apparently senseless violence that pervades his books, but the violence acts to highlight the extraordinary loving relationship that his central characters share, and at times it comes to the fore. An example is the afternoon's war that is laid on for Guy, as a visiting dignitary, by two neighbouring towns that have a dispute over who owns a particular meadow. Although it is entirely a battle that is described, the parallels with a football match are quite uncanny, and at the moment that realization is reached, the laughter is difficult to hold back.

Whitbourn is much under-rated as a writer, but it is sad to say that this book will do little to enhance his reputation. I feel if this trilogy had been written whole before it was submitted, it would then have had to have been radically restructured, and the result would have been the kind of runaway success a writer of his talents richly deserves. Next trilogy, perhaps.

From the vastness of trilogies to the tautness of novellae – we move to four authors who have written vast works but have produced four novellas in the same worlds for an anonymous editor in the oddly titled, **Worlds That Weren't** (Roc/NewAmerican Library, \$21.95). First up, Harry Turtledove supplies "The Daimon," an account of what would have happened in the ancient world had Socrates accompanied the Athenian expedition to Corsica in 415 B.C. (Turtledove styles them "Sokrates" and "B.C.E." but I'll stick to the terms I learned at school). Turtledove's *World War in the Balance* was a disappointment to me, although it seems to have been well received. This story is equally amiable in its way, but I never did take to alternative ancient histories – there is simply not enough that can be new in a story like this to engage my interest. In contrast, it came as a pleasant surprise to discover how much I enjoyed "Shikari in Galveston" by S. M. Stirling, for it is set in the world of *The Peshawar Lancers*, a book I have on my shelf but have not yet had time to read. Stirling writes here in the manner of a late-19th century adventure story-teller, and the story features a prodigious feat about which I have





some reservations, but which interestingly is echoed fairly exactly in Ray Feist's *Talon of the Silver Hawk* (see below).

Third up is the reason I was given this book to review. Mary Gentle supplies "The Logistics of Carthage," a kind of prequel to her masterpiece, *Ash: A Secret History*. This is a fascinating story in its own right – Gentle introduces us to some of the stranger aspects of religious observance, how human corpses rot, the life and habits of pigs, and how these can be combined to resolve a military dilemma for a band of mercenaries – and I enjoyed it immensely, but it does feel as if it doesn't stand alone in the way the other three stories here do. There are echoes of the longer work that would not resound without its presence in the mind of the reader, right down to one of the more subtle points of the story, and this feels like a shortcoming – although, having not read the other three's contextual longer works, it may simply be that there are extra-textual references there that I have not seen but, ignorance apparently being bliss, lead me thus to be unfair to Gentle. Which would be a shame. *Ash* is probably one of the best sf novels I have read for a long time, and this story fits perfectly with it. Buy both, and read them, and you will see what I mean.

Last in the book, and an unalloyed delight for being such a surprise, is "The Last Ride of German Freddie" by Walter Jon Williams. I have long admired Williams's work from afar, assiduously collecting his books, but I have to admit the last I read was *Days of Atonement*, not least notable for being set in the entirely non-trendy and out-of-the-way state of New Mexico. There is nothing out-of-the-way about the setting of this story however. Without reading the afterword, I pitched in completely cold, and had a glorious time realizing who the real people really were and how the past had been changed. I don't read blurbs on books I intend to read anyway, so I didn't have this spoiled for me. If you don't even want an inkling, don't read the next paragraph.

I have no intention per se of revealing the story here, but to whet the appetite of waverers, this story neatly closes the circle of the book by introducing a much more recent philosopher than Socrates into a different kind of battle, a western shoot-out, as a situation that would test his philosophical ideas.

It is the pure "achieve" of this story that makes it so compelling. Williams almost effortlessly teaches us some pretty abstruse philosophy while entertaining us even to the point of one or two belly laughs – philosophy is always good for irony.

In all, then, this is a first-class book of stories and well worth the beer money of any of us. Also, if you're wavering over any of these authors, each of these stories is an excellent introduction to, and a fair example of, their longer work.

"Fantasy" as a genre comes in for its fair share of brickbats. In times past I have read the likes of Robert Jordan and David Gemmell in order to gauge their effectiveness, and largely found them plausible wordsmiths with vastly inflated stories to tell. I had never, however, read any Raymond E. Feist, and as he has developed something of a reputation, when the first book of a new series, *Talon of the Silver Hawk* (Harper-Collins, £17.99) came my way, I grasped the opportunity to find out what he was capable of.

What I found was, I am afraid, a remarkably smoothly written catalogue of clichés. If there is one spark of originality about this book, it is setting the origins of the hero in a quasi-Indian tribe from the mountains. Other than that, there is the usual pseudo-European mediaeval (did no others societies have middle ages that could be raided for local colour, or is it that the European flavour is more readily recognizable to the uneducated masses) claptrap of slaughter of his entire tribe to ensure he has no complicating loyalties later in the story, experiencing sex and food and beer and subtle interactions for the first time, of coming to a city and nearly losing all he has thus far gained in one impetuous moment, and of the final prodigious achievement (mentioned above) of shooting a fleeing opponent in the back with a longbow over an unlikely distance while also

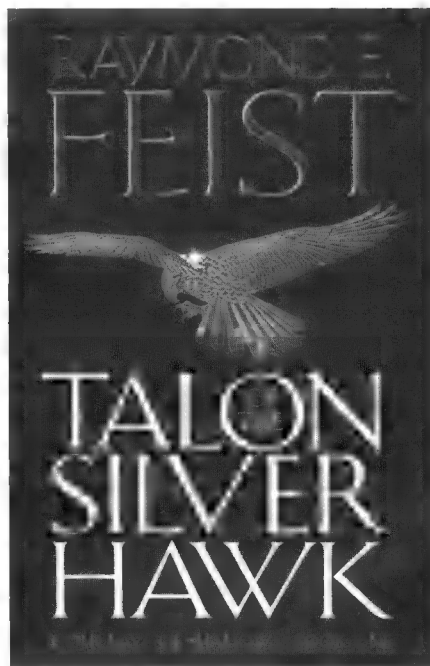
otherwise handicapped. In S.M. Sterling's work, this is at least witnessed, and thus properly the stuff of legends. Here, our hero, the eponymous Talon of the Silver Hawk, does this while all alone then passes out, and is woken by his friends who deduce his achievement and also promise immortality around campfires into the future.

Since when was it heroic to shoot someone in the back? In both cases this was justified on the basis that the escapee would have carried news to other enemy forces and brought back overwhelming odds. This is a perfectly valid justification of an act of war. But it isn't very heroic.

One fascinating aspect of this book is how well written it is. Recently a copy of one of the new Warhammer magazines passed through my hands, and it was interesting to note how the prose was exactly as overwrought as the mightily thewed hairy chested barbarian axe-wielders in many of the illustrations. Feist exhibits none of this hyperbole, but his cool descriptions of even some of the most decadent actions does convey the impression that his hero doesn't really care all that much about anything, and for me this is its greatest failing of all.

Finally, it has never been known before for me to receive a book and sit down and read it immediately in one sitting. But this is what I did with *V.A.O.* (PS Publishing, £8), Geoff Ryman's new novella from Pete Crowther's apparently thriving small press. This story is proof if proof were needed that Ryman's imagination is still far out on the edge of the possible as applies to us in our society today. Here, his subject is Alzheimer's Disease, and the way old people are becoming a problem as more of them live longer and the demographic inexorably changes. Ryman postulates a near future that is a kind of hell, with the inventor of *V.A.O.* – Victim Activated Ordnance – an inmate of an old people's home where his oldest friend is suffering the advanced stages of Alzheimer's Disease. In this, as in many of Ryman's stories, the central character is not necessarily the most sympathetic of people, but rather like Scrooge he does finally redeem himself. For such a short novella there is a remarkable depth of characterization, and the reader becomes immersed in the story extremely quickly. It is a delight to see something new from Ryman, and it will be good to see his name being considered for awards again with this book. This (and a forthcoming story in this magazine) will have to act as a stop gap until his new novel *Air* finally appears in the US.

Paul Brazier



This is a list of all sf, fantasy and horror titles, and books of related interest, received by Interzone during the period specified. Official publication dates, where known, are given in *italics* at the end of each entry. Descriptive phrases in quotes following titles are taken from book covers rather than title pages. A listing here does not preclude a separate review in this issue (or in a future issue) of the magazine.

Abbey, Lynn, ed. **Thieves' World: Turning Points**. Tor, ISBN 0-312-87517-7, 317pp, hardcover, \$25.95. (Shared-world fantasy anthology, first edition; proof copy received; a new volume in the revived shared-world series that commenced with Abbey's novel recent *Sanctuary* [2002], it contains all-new stories by Robin Wayne Bailey, Raymond E. Feist, Dennis L. McKiernan, Jody Lynn Nye, Andrew Offutt, Diana L. Paxson, Mickey Zucker Reichert and others.) November 2002.

Anthony, Piers. **Up in a Heaval**. Tor, ISBN 0-312-86904-5, 348pp, hardcover, cover by Darrell K. Sweet, \$24.95. (Humorous fantasy novel, first edition; the 26th in the "Xanth" series of light, essentially juvenile fantasies, in which, according to the blurb, "an innocent piece of Mundane Snail Mail has provoked the dreaded Demon Jupiter to hurl his Red Spot at the magical land of Xanth.") 17th October 2002.

Arden, Tom. **Shadow Black**. Big Engine [PO Box 185, Abingdon, Oxon. OX14 1GR], ISBN 1-903468-05-1, 299pp, trade paperback, cover by Deirdre Counihan, £8.99. (Humorous horror/fantasy/sf novel, first edition; "Tom Arden" is a pseudonym for the Australian-born [but long resident-in-Britain] novelist and critic David Rain; this is his sixth novel, following his five-volume fantasy epic, "The Orokon" [Gollancz, 1997-2001] – however it is rumoured to have been written first; a tale about some very weird movie-makers, it looks like great fun: Molly Brown commends it on the back cover as "Sunset Boulevard set on the English coast and directed by Fellini"; for ordering information, see the publisher's website: www.bigengine.co.uk.) October 2002.

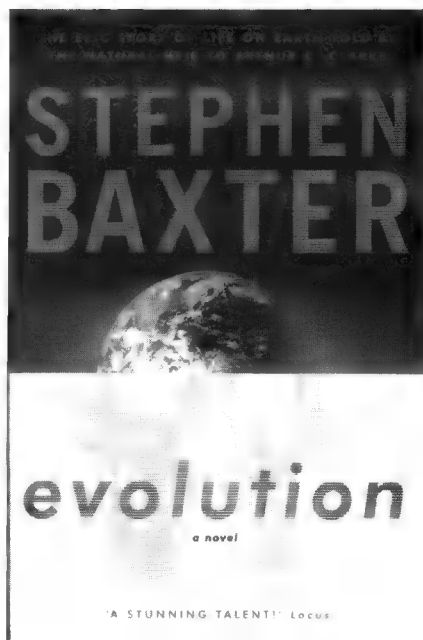
Atzmon, Gilad. **Guide to the Perplexed**. Translated by Philip Simpson. Serpent's Tail, ISBN 1-85242-826-0, vii+151pp, trade paperback, £7.99. (Sf novel, first published in Israel, 2001; proof copy received; set "forty years after the destruction of the state of Israel," this is a debut novel by an Israeli writer who now lives in London and works as a jazz saxophonist and composer; the publishers describe the book as "comparable to Philip Roth's remarkable novel *Operation Shylock* in its stark anti-Zionist views as Atzmon polemically champions the benefits of the Diaspora against the isolation of the Israeli state"; it sounds tendentious, as most "mainstreamer sf" – from Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-Four* to Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* – tends to be, but it looks interesting.) 14th November 2002.

Barker, Clive. **Abarat**. HarperCollins, ISBN 0-00-225952-4, xxv+389pp, hardcover, cover by the author, £17.99. (Heavily illustrated juvenile fantasy novel, first published in the USA, 2002; it's billed as the first of a tetralogy, and – as all the world knows by now – film rights have been sold to the Walt Disney company for some unimaginable sum; Barker's illustrations, all printed in colour, have a certain rough, grotesque charm, but one would have thought the thick art paper upon which the book is printed makes it too weighty for any likely child-reader's hands.) 23rd September 2002.

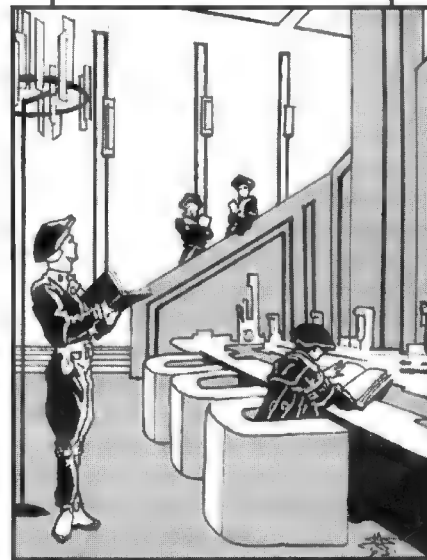
Baxter, Stephen. **Evolution**. "A novel." Gollancz, ISBN 0-575-07342-X, 585pp, C-format paperback, £12.99. (Sf novel, first edition; there is a simultaneous hardcover edition [not seen], priced at £18.99; billed as "the epic story of life on Earth," it's an episodic blockbuster about primate evolution – from 65 million years ago to now; no one could accuse Mr Baxter of being unambitious in his choice of themes...) 21st November 2002.

Baxter, Stephen. **Riding the Rock**. Introduction by Gregory Benford. PS Publishing [Hamilton House, 4 Park Ave., Harrogate, N. Yorks. HG2 9BQ], ISBN 1-902880-59-5, 61pp, small-press trade paperback, cover by David A. Hardy, £8. (Sf novella, first edition; there is a simultaneous hardcover edition priced at £25 [not seen]; this is a signed edition, limited to 500 numbered paperback copies and 300 numbered hardcover copies; it's a new "Xeelee" story.) September 2002.

Benjamin, Curt. **The Prince of Dreams: Volume Two of Seven Brothers**. DAW, ISBN 0-7564-0089-9, 456pp, hardcover, cover by Luis Royo, \$23.95. (Fantasy novel, first edition; follow-up to *The Prince of Shadow*.) September 2002.



BOOKS RECEIVED



SEPTEMBER
–OCTOBER
2002

Berg, Carol. **Restoration**. "Book Three of The Rai-Kirah." Orbit, ISBN 1-84149-111-X, 471pp, C-format paperback, cover by Chris Moore, £10.99. (Fantasy novel, first published in the USA, 2002; conclusion to the trilogy begin with *Transformation* [2000] and *Revelation* [2001] – by a new, but not young, American writer [born 1948].) September 2002.

Bowkett, Stephen. **Thaw: The Wintering, Book Three**. Dolphin, ISBN 1-85881-875-3, 230pp, B-format paperback, cover by Stuart Williams, £4.99. (Juvenile sf novel, first edition; conclusion of a future ice-age trilogy which has not come to our attention before now – the previous volumes were called *Ice* and *Storm*.) 17th October 2002.

Brown, Fredric. **Martians and Madness: The Complete SF Novels of Fredric Brown**. Edited by Ben Yalow. Introduction by Philip Klass ["William Tenn"]. NESFA Press [PO Box 809, Framingham, MA 01701, USA], ISBN 1-886778-17-5, 633pp, hardcover, cover by Bob Eggleton, \$29. (Sf omnibus, first edition; it contains the novels *What Mad Universe* [1949], *The Lights in the Sky are Stars* [1953], *Martians, Go Home* [1955], *Rogue in Space* [1957] and *The Mind Thing* [1961], plus the novelettes "Gateway to Darkness" [1949] and "Gateway to Glory" [1950]; concluding a two-volume Fredric Brown [1906-1972] set – the first volume was *From These Ashes: The Complete Short SF of Fredric Brown* [2001] – this is another very worthy NESFA collection; recommended.) September 2002.

Burroughs, William S. **Ghost of Chance.** Illustrated by the author. Serpent's Tail, 1-85242-457-5, 59pp, B-format paperback, £6.99. (Phantasmagoric novella, first published in the USA, 1991; a late and minor work by the one-and-only VWSB [1914-1997], the publishers describe it as "an adventure story set in the jungle of Madagascar" which displays all "the author's trademark concerns – drugs, paranoia and lemurs"; Nicholas Royle and Elizabeth Young, both of whom have been *Interzone* contributors in their time, commend it, as does that well-known Burroughs-and-Ballard fan, Will Self.) 17th October 2002.

Campbell, Ramsey. **Ramsey Campbell, Probably: On Horror and Sundry Fantasies.** Edited by S. T. Joshi. Introduction by Douglas E. Winter. PS Publishing [Hamilton House, 4 Park Ave., Harrogate, N. Yorks. HG2 9BQ], ISBN 1-902880-40-4, 441pp, trade paperback, cover by J. K. Potter, £30. (Non-fiction collection, first edition; there is ■ simultaneous hardcover edition priced at £65 [not seen]; this is a signed edition, limited to 500 numbered paperback copies and 200 numbered hardcover copies; it's a hefty volume which "collects 140,000 words of Campbell's non-fiction from the last three decades" – reviews, introductions and other occasional writings, mostly on horror; despite the fearsome price, it's recommended as an essential item for all Campbell fans – and for all who care about horror fiction, particularly in Britain.) September 2002.

Carey, Jacqueline. **Kushiel's Dart.** Macmillan, ISBN 1-405-00097-X, 701pp, C-format paperback, cover by John Jude Palencar, £10.99. (Fantasy novel, first published in the USA, 2001; "a massive tale about the violent death of an old age and the birth of ■ new one," commended by Storm Constantine, Robert Jordan and others, it seems better-written than most Big Commercial Fantasy.) 20th September 2002.

Carroll, Jonathan. **White Apples.** Tor, ISBN 0-765-30388-4, 304pp, hardcover, cover by Gregory Manchess, \$24.95. (Fantasy novel, first edition; the publishers describe it as "by turns quirky, romantic, awesome, and irresistible... a tale of love, fatherhood, death, and life"; there are the usual nice cover comments from the ever-growing Carroll fan-club: Pat Conroy, Neil Gaiman, Stephen King, Jonathan Lethem, and unnamed reviewers from the *New Yorker* ["... a quirky piece of intelligent pop that is also surprisingly moving"], the *New York Times* and the *Washington Post*.) October 2002.

Chadbourne, Mark. **The Devil in Green.** "Book One of The Dark Age." Gollancz, ISBN 0-575-07274-1, 358pp, C-format paperback, cover by Les Edwards, £10.99. (Fantasy novel, first edition; there may be a simultaneous hardcover edition [not seen]; first of a new



trilogy which is ■ direct follow-up to the author's earlier "Age of Misrule" trilogy – set in a near-future England where "a new Dark Age of superstition has fallen across the land... with the sudden return of magic, ancient gods and mythic creatures.") 31st October 2002.

Clement, Hal. **Heavy Planet: The Classic Mesklin Stories.** Tor/Orb, ISBN 0-765-30368-X, 414pp, trade paperback, \$15.95. (Sf omnibus, first edition in this form; proof copy received; "Hal Clement" is the pseudonym of Harry C. Stubbs [born 1922]; in large part, this is a reprint, under a new title, of *The Essential Hal Clement, Volume 3: Variations on a Theme by Sir Isaac Newton* [NESFA Press, 2000]; it contains all the "Mesklin" novels and stories – *Mission of Gravity* [1953], *Star Light* [1970], "Lecture Demonstration" [1973] and the recent "Under" [2000], plus the author's non-fiction piece "Whirligig World" [Astounding SF, June 1953]; recommended to lovers of hard sf.) November 2002.

Collins, Max Allan. **Dark Angel: Before the Dawn.** Ebury Press, ISBN 0-091-89031-4, 271pp, A-format paperback, £5.99. (Sf TV series spinoff novel, first published in the USA, 2002; it's a prequel to the cyberpunkish USA show, about a "kick-ass, bike-riding genetically modified girl," created by James Cameron and Charles H. Eglee and starring Jessica Alba.) 3rd October 2002.

De Lint, Charles. **Tapping the Dream Tree.** Tor, ISBN 0-312-87401-4, 541pp, hardcover, \$26.95. (Fantasy collection, first edition; proof copy received; all the stories are set in de Lint's imaginary city of Newford; there are 18 of them, mostly reprinted from original anthologies edited by Martin H. Greenberg and his cohorts such as John Helfers and Larry Segriff.) November 2002.

Denning, Troy. **Star by Star.** "Star Wars: The New Jedi Order." Arrow/Lucas Books, ISBN 0-09-941038-9, 605pp, A-format paperback, cover by Cliff Nielsen, £6.99. (Sf movie spinoff novel, first published in the USA, 2002; this must be the fattest single novel in the franchise to date.) 3rd October 2002.

Dietz, William C. **EarthRise.** Ace, ISBN 0-441-00971-9, 418pp, hardcover, cover by Edwin Herder, \$23.95. (Sf novel, first edition; sequel to *DeathDay* [2001] – "military science fiction at its best.") 3rd September 2002.

Di Filippo, Paul. **Babylon Sisters and Other Posthumans.** Prime Books [PO Box 36503, Canton, OH 44735, USA], ISBN 1-894815-81-5, 321pp, trade paperback, cover by Sang Lee, \$17.95. (Sf/fantasy collection, first edition; it contains 14 varied and lively stories by one of our favourite writers, dating from across the span of his career, 1985 to 2001; three of the more recent pieces, "Life Sentence" [1996], "Angelmakers" [1999] and the title story, "Babylon Sisters" [2001], first appeared in *Interzone*; the remainder come from *F&SF*, *Amazing*, *SF Age* and other publications; the last story in the book, "The Scab's Progress," is ■ collaboration with Bruce Sterling; recommended; Prime Books is a new print-on-demand publisher run by Sean Wallace, a spinoff or ■ transmutation of Cosmos Books [formerly an imprint of Wildside Press]; to order, see their website: www.primebooks.net.) No date shown: received in November 2002.

Dozois, Gardner, ed. **The Mammoth Book of Best New Science Fiction: 15th Annual Collection.** Robinson, ISBN 1-84119-586-3, xlvii+702pp, B-format paperback, cover by Pete Rozycki, £9.99. (Sf anthology, first published in the USA as *The Year's Best Science Fiction: Nineteenth Annual Collection*, 2002; as well as the usual lengthy introduction and year's summation, it contains stories, all reprinted from 2001, by Eleanor Arnason, Michael Blumlein, Michael Cassutt, Brenda W. Clough, Paul Di Filippo, Andy Duncan, Carolyn Ives Gilman, Simon Ings, James Patrick Kelly, Nancy Kress, Paul McAuley, Maureen F. McHugh, Ian R. MacLeod [twice], Ken MacLeod, Robert Reed, Alastair Reynolds, Geoff Ryman, Dan Simmons, Allen M. Steele, Charles Stross, Michael Swanwick and others; two of the selections are from *Interzone* – Ian R. MacLeod's "Isabel of the Fall" and Chris Beckett's "Marcher"; recommended.) 17th October 2002.

Erskine, Barbara. **Hiding from the Light.** HarperCollins, ISBN 0-00-225785-8, 542pp, hardcover, cover by Larry Rostant, £17.99. (Horror novel, first edition; perhaps better described as a "supernatural romance" than ■ horror yarn, this is an Essex-set tale involving the ghost of the notorious real-life "witchfinder general" Matthew Hopkins; it's by the popular British author of such fantasy-tinged bestsellers

as *Lady of Hay* ["which has sold well over ■ million copies worldwide"], *Midnight is a Lonely Place*, *House of Echoes*, *On the Edge of Darkness*, and *Whispers in the Sand*.) 7th October 2002.

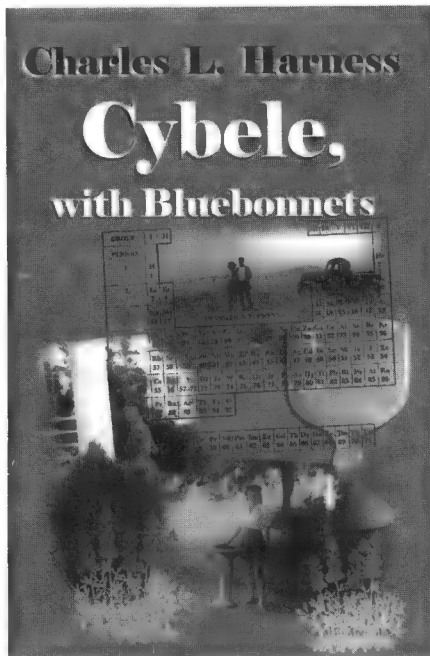
Farren, Mick. **The DNA Cowboys Trilogy.** The Do-Not Press [16 The Woodlands, London SE13 6TY], ISBN 1-899344-93-4, 532pp, B-format paperback, cover by Dave Crook, £10. (Sf/fantasy omnibus, first edition; there is ■ simultaneous hardcover edition [not seen], priced at £15; the three weird, pop-cult novels it contains were first published in the UK as Mayflower Books paperback originals – *The Quest of the DNA Cowboys* [1976], *Synaptic Manhunt* [1976] and *The Neural Atrocity* [1977]; this edition contains ■ new three-page introduction by the British author, who has long been exiled in Los Angeles, poor thing; ■ friend describes him as "the last Bohemian standing"; another old acquaintance, Mick Jagger, is quoted as saying: "That mad old c***. He still around?") 26th September 2002.

Farren, Mick. **Underland.** Tor, ISBN 0-765-30321-3, 448pp, hardcover, cover by David Seeley, \$27.95. (Horror novel, first edition; another in the author's "Victor Renquist" series of vampire thrillers, following *The Time of Feasting* [1996], *Darklost* [2000] and *More Than Mortal* [2001]; Farren has been dubbed by some American magazine "the Dark Prince of pop fiction"; as we remarked of his previous book, this looks like deliberately old-fashioned, British-flavoured, black-magic tosh, reminiscent of the "Prince of Storytellers," Dennis Wheatley – or, to choose a more recent example, somewhat similar to the supernatural thrillers of Brian Lumley.) 29th November 2002.

Gemmell, David A. **Drenai Tales, Volume III: The Legend of Deathwalker, Winter Warriors, Hero in the Shadows.** Bantam Press, ISBN 0-593-04918-7, 944pp, C-format paperback, cover by John Bolton, £12.99. (Fantasy omnibus, first edition; there is a simultaneous hardcover edition [not seen] priced at £20; the three named novels first appeared separately in the UK, in 1996, 1997 and 2000.) 3rd October 2002.

Gerber, Michael. **Barry Trotter and the Shameless Parody.** "Not even a MINOR film!" Gollancz, ISBN 0-575-07454-X, 276pp, small-format hardcover, cover by Douglas Carrel, £6.99. (Parodic fantasy novel, first published in the USA, 2001; a take-off on *You Know Who*, in which "Barry Trotter is 22 and has never left Hogwash School of Magic"; according to the back-flap author note, Michael Gerber is American, aged 32, and has contributed to the *New Yorker*, *Playboy* and the *Wall Street Journal*, but – "This is his first book. And it shows"; in the spirit of Harvard Lampoon's bestselling *Bored of the Rings* [1969], it's straplined "Utterly Unauthorised and Totally Exploitative.") 19th September 2002.

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Graham, Ian. **Monument.** Orbit, ISBN 1-84149-102-0, 373pp, hardcover, £10. (Fantasy novel, first edition; ■ debut book by ■ new British writer [born 1971], it's commended by David Gemmell.) October 2002.

Green, Simon R. **Blood and Honour.** Gollancz, ISBN 0-575-05545-6, 316pp, A-format paperback, cover by David Farren, £6.99. (Fantasy novel, first published in the UK, 1992; reviewed by Wendy Bradley in *Interzone* 65.) 10th October 2002.

Green, Simon R. **Drinking Midnight Wine.** Gollancz, ISBN 0-575-07297-0, 328pp, A-format paperback, cover by Jon Sullivan, £6.99. (Fantasy novel, first published in the UK, 2001.) 10th October 2002.

Hamilton, Laurell K. **Narcissus in Chains: An Anita Blake, Vampire Hunter Novel.** Orbit, ISBN 1-84149-134-9, 533pp, A-format paperback, cover by Steve Stone, £6.99. (Horror/fantasy novel, first published in the USA, 2001 [not "2002" as it states in this volume]; tenth in a female-oriented crime/dark fantasy series, the success of which presumably rides on that of the [unrelated] TV show, *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*.) September 2002.

Harness, Charles L. **Cybele, with Bluebonnets.** Introduction by George Zebrowski. NESFA Press [PO Box 809, Framingham, MA 01701, USA], ISBN 1-886778-41-8, 157pp, hardcover, cover by Jane Dennis, \$21. (Mainstream novel by an sf writer, first edition; although it's primarily an autobiographical work, set in the Texas of the author's youth, according to Zebrowski's introduction "it might be described as a ghost story, even a tall ghost story.") Late entry: July publication, received in September 2002.

Harrison, Harry. **Stars and Stripes Triumphant: Stars and Stripes Trilogy,**

Volume 3. New English Library, ISBN 0-340-68922-6, 340pp, A-format paperback, cover by Steve Stone, £6.99. (Alternate-world sf novel, first published in the UK, 2002; conclusion of the trilogy about a 19th-century war-which-never-happened between Britain and the USA.) 19th September 2002.

Hartwell, David G., and Kathryn Cramer, eds. **The Hard SF Renaissance.** Tor, ISBN 0-312-87635-1, 960pp, hardcover, cover by Gregory Manchess, \$39.95. (Sf anthology, first edition; a follow-up to the editors' earlier tome *The Ascent of Wonder: The Evolution of Hard SF* [1994], this is another massive volume of more than 40 stories, all tending towards the avowedly science-based kind of sf, with reprinted work by Poul Anderson, Stephen Baxter, Gregory Benford, Ben Bova, David Brin, Ted Chiang, Arthur C. Clarke, Hal Clement, Greg Egan, Joe Haldeman, James P. Hogan, Nancy Kress, Geoffrey A. Landis, David Langford, Paul McAuley, Frederik Pohl, Robert Reed, Alastair Reynolds, Kim Stanley Robinson, Robert J. Sawyer, the late Charles Sheffield, Brian Stableford, Bruce Sterling, Michael Swanwick, Vernor Vinge, Sarah Zettel and others; the book also contains ■ considerable amount of critical commentary; recommended as ■ thorough attempt to chart a significant movement in recent sf.) 25th November 2002.

Haydon, Elizabeth. **Requiem for the Sun.** Gollancz, ISBN 0-575-07307-1, 436pp, hardcover, cover by Geoff Taylor, £12.99. (Fantasy novel, first published in the USA, 2002; ■ new follow-up to Haydon's "Rhapsody" trilogy [1999-2001], it is being pushed by Gollancz at a special bargain price; the American author is described as "an accomplished herbalist, harpist and madrigal singer.") 17th October 2002.

Hetley, James A. **The Summer Country.** Ace, ISBN 0-441-00972-7, 361pp, trade paperback, cover by Lori Earley, \$14. (Fantasy novel, first edition; a debut novel by a new American writer; it comes with advance praise from Charles de Lint – and, indeed, it seems to be his kind of thing.) 1st October 2002.

Hobb, Robin. **Fool's Errand: The Tawny Man, I.** Voyager, ISBN 0-00-648601-0, 661pp, A-format paperback, cover by John Howe, £7.99. (Fantasy novel, first published in the UK, 2001; "Robin Hobb" is a pseudonym of Megan Lindholm.) 7th October 2002.

Hobb, Robin. **The Golden Fool: The Tawny Man, II.** Voyager, ISBN 0-00-224727-5, 599pp, hardcover, cover by John Howe, £17.99. (Fantasy novel, first edition; the first sentence of the blurb reads thus: "Fitz and the Fool have succeeded in rescuing Prince Dutiful from the clutches of the Piebald rebels, and have returned with him to Buckkeep Castle.") 7th October 2002.



Hodgson, William Hope. **The House on the Borderland and Other Novels.**

Introduction by China Miéville. "Fantasy Masterworks, 33." Gollancz, ISBN 0-575-07372-1, ix+637pp, B-format paperback,

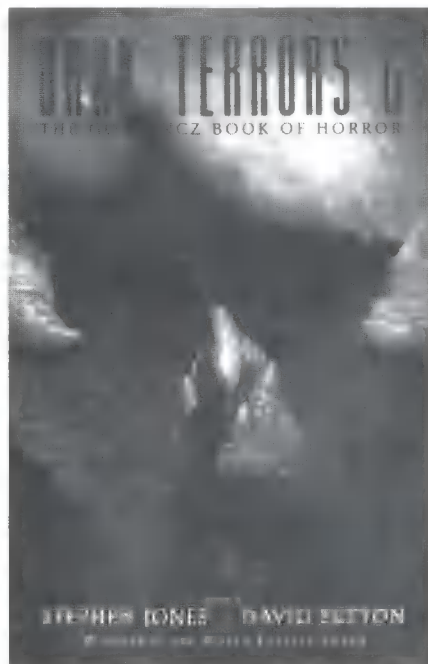
cover by Jim Burns, £6.99. (Sf/fantasy/horror omnibus, first published in the USA, 1946; like the Arkham House edition upon which it is clearly based, it contains four novels by British writer Hodgson [1877-1918], all first published in the UK before the First World War – *The Boats of the "Glen Carrig"* [1907], *The House on the Borderland* [1908], *The Ghost Pirates* [1909] and *The Night Land* [1912]; the last of these four [actually the first-written – Hodgson couldn't find a publisher for years] is very lengthy, and so inevitably the print in this edition is small; nevertheless £6.99 seems a remarkably low price for the riches that are here; recommended.) 10th October 2002.

Holder, Nancy, and Jeff Mariotte. **Endangered Species.** "Angel." Pocket, ISBN 0-7434-5070-1, 376pp, hardcover, \$17.95 [USA], £12.99 [UK]. (Horror/fantasy TV-series spinoff novel, first edition; it seems to be a simultaneous first edition in the USA and the UK; based on the *Angel* TV series, created by Joss Whedon [and spun off from *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*], it's billed as "the very first 'Angel' hardback.") 7th October 2002.

Hoyt, Sarah A. **All Night Awake.** Ace, ISBN 0-441-00973-5, 311pp, hardcover, cover by Anthony Frederick Augustus Sandys, \$22.95. (Fantasy novel, first edition; a follow-up to *Ill Met by Moonlight* [2001], in which this Portuguese-born American writer [Sarah de Almeida Hoyt] once more has the temerity to tackle the Bard: "A poet with promise and little else, young Will Shakespeare is having a harder time of it in London than he thought he would... though his contact with the world of faerie has left him with poetry in his blood...") 1st October 2002.

Irvine, Ian. **Geomancer: Volume One of The Well of Echoes.** Orbit, ISBN 1-84149-209-4, 621pp, C-format paperback, cover by Lee Gibbons, £11.99. (Fantasy novel, first published in Australia, 2001; the beginning of a new series of Big Commercial Fantasies by the author of the "View from the Mirror" quartet; Irvine was born in Australia in 1950, and has a PhD in marine sciences.) September 2002.

Jocks, Yvonne, ed. **Witches' Brew.** Berkley, ISBN 0-425-18609-1, 326pp, trade paperback, \$13. (Fantasy anthology, first edition; it contains all-reprint stories, poems and essays on the witchcraft theme, by Louisa May Alcott, Ambrose Bierce, H. P. Blavatsky, Ray Bradbury, Emily Bronte, Anton Chekhov, Emily Dickinson, Conan Doyle, Harlan Ellison, Louise Erdrich, Mary Wilkins Freeman, the Brothers Grimm, Nathaniel Hawthorne, Shirley Jackson, Erica Jong, Dean Koontz, Ursula Le Guin, H. P.



Lovecraft [actually, an August Derleth "collaboration"], Cotton Mather [an account of one of the Salem witch trials], Charles Perrault, Kathryn Ptacek, William Shakespeare [an extract from *Macbeth*], "Evelyn Vaughan" [this is the editor, Yvonne Jocks], Lady Wilde [Oscar's mother], W. B. Yeats and others; an eclectic line-up indeed; although he's not named as co-editor, this book is clearly a Martin H. Greenberg production [copyright shared by Tekno Books, which is Greenberg's company].) October 2002.

Jones, J. V. **A Fortress of Grey Ice: Book Two of Sword of Shadows.** Orbit, ISBN 1-85723-996-2, xvii+734pp, A-format paperback, cover by Bob Warner, £7.99. (Fantasy novel, first published in the USA [?], 2002; follow-up to *A Cavern of Black Ice* [1999].) November 2002.

Jones, Stephen, ed. **Keep Out the Night.** Illustrated by Randy Broecker. PS Publishing [Hamilton House, 4 Park Ave., Harrogate, N. Yorks. HG2 9BQ], ISBN 1-902880-55-2, 249pp, hardcover, cover by Edward Miller, £45. (Horror anthology, first edition; there is a simultaneous "deluxe" edition priced at £65 [not seen]; this is a signed edition, limited to 500 numbered hardcover copies and 100 numbered slipcased copies; billed as "the first volume of the new 'Not at Night' series" [in homage to Christine Campbell Thomson's original "Not at Night" anthology series of the 1920s and '30s], it contains a dozen reprinted stories, many of them from obscure sources, by Sidney J. Bounds, Poppy Z. Brite, Ramsey Campbell, Hugh B. Cave, Basil Copper, Dennis Etchison, Neil Gaiman, Caitlin R. Kiernan, Tim Lebbon, Brian Lumley, Kim Newman and Michael Marshall Smith; it's an attractive book, with a deliberate old-time feel.) October 2002.

Jones, Stephen, ed. **The Mammoth Book of Best New Horror 13.** Robinson, ISBN 1-

84119-540-5, xi+590pp, B-format paperback, £6.99. (Horror anthology, first edition; it contains reprint stories, all from the year 2001, by Poppy Z. Brite, Ramsey Campbell, Dennis Etchison, Christopher Fowler, Charles L. Grant, Muriel Gray, Elizabeth Hand, Graham Joyce, Chico Kidd, Joel Lane, Tanith Lee, Thomas Ligotti, Kelly Link, Richard A. Lupoff, Paul McAuley, Douglas Smith, Conrad Williams and others [wot, no Kim Newman this year?]; there's also a very long introduction and the usual ghoulish "necrology"; recommended.) 18th October 2002.

Jones, Stephen, and David Sutton, eds. **Dark Terrors 6: The Gollancz Book of Horror.** Gollancz, ISBN 0-575-07249-0, xii+499pp, C-format paperback, cover by Gary Blythe, £12.99. (Horror anthology, first edition; there may be a simultaneous hardcover edition [not seen]; another bumper volume, it contains all-new stories by Stephen Baxter, John Burke, Ramsey Campbell, Basil Copper, Les Daniels, Christopher Fowler, Mick Garris, Chico Kidd, Caitlin R. Kiernan, Nancy Kilpatrick, Joel Lane, Tim Lebbon, Samantha Lee, Tanith Lee, Graham Masterton, Richard Christian Matheson, Yvonne Navarro, Kim Newman, Geoff Nicholson, Nicholas Royle, David J. Schow, Michael Marshall Smith, Jeff VanderMeer, Conrad Williams and others; a strong line-up.) 24th October 2002.

Joyce, Graham. **Smoking Poppy.** Gollancz, ISBN 0-575-07304-7, 279pp, B-format paperback, £6.99. (Mainstream/horror novel, first published in the UK, 2001; set in Thailand, the first edition was described as "*The Beach* meets *Heart of Darkness*... a moving and sometimes funny portrait of a man's search for his meaning of life.") 31st October 2002.

Jude, Dick. **Fantasy Art Masters: The Best in Fantasy and SF Art Worldwide.** Collins, ISBN 0-00-713747-8, 144pp, large-format hardcover, cover by Keith Parkinson, £17.99. (Fantasy art portfolio, first edition; a well-illustrated follow-up to the same compiler's *Fantasy Art of the New Millennium* [1999], it features work by, and interviews with, ten artists – Darrel Anderson, Judith Clute, Phil Hale, John Harris, Ian Miller, Keith Parkinson, J. K. Potter, Dave Seeley, Greg Spalenka and Anne Sudworth; recommended.) 4th November 2002.

Koontz, Dean. **By the Light of the Moon.** Headline, ISBN 0-7472-7073-2, 373pp, hardcover, £18.99. (Horror/suspense novel, first edition [?]; proof copy received; according to a note in this proof, Koontz's novels have now "sold over 250 million copies worldwide" and "are published in 38 languages" – impressive figures indeed, which [if accurate] must place him second only to Stephen King.) 4th November 2002.

Lackey, Mercedes. **Exile's Honour: A Novel of Valdemar.** DAW, ISBN 0-7564-0085-6,

433pp, hardcover, cover by Jody A. Lee, \$24.95. (Fantasy novel, first edition; latest in the vast "Heralds of Valdemar" series, it's dedicated to "the memory of NYFD crews lost 9/11/2001.") *October 2002.*

Le Guin, Ursula K. **Tales from Earthsea.** Orion, ISBN 1-84255-206-6, xv+296pp, hardcover, cover by David Wyatt, £10.99. (Fantasy collection, first published in the USA, 2001; an elegant "Foreword," five sizeable stories, and an afterword in the form of "A Description of Earthsea"; recommended – but why is the UK edition appearing a year late?; reviewed, from the US edition, by Nick Gevers in *Interzone* 169.) *22nd October 2002.*

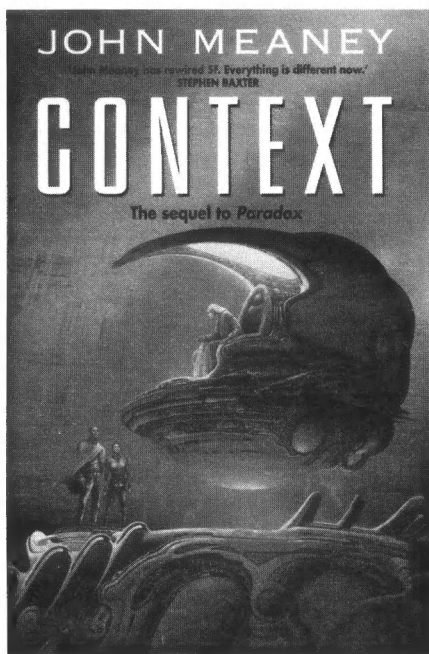
Le Guin, Ursula K. **The Telling.** Gollancz, ISBN 1-85798-332-7, 264pp, A-format paperback, cover by Sue Michniewicz, £5.99. (Sf novel, first published in the USA, 2000; a tale in Le Guin's famous "Hainish cycle"; reviewed by Nick Gevers in *Interzone* 162.) *17th October 2002.*

Little, Denise, ed. **Vengeance Fantastic.** DAW, ISBN 0-7564-0084-8, viii+336pp, A-format paperback, \$6.99. (Fantasy anthology, first edition; it contains 17 all-original stories on vengeful themes, by Gary A. Braunbeck, P. N. Elrod, Nina Kiriki Hoffman, Bill McCay, Jody Lynn Nye, Mel Odom, Mickey Zucker Reichert, Alan Rodgers, Kristine Kathryn Rusch, Elizabeth Ann Scarborough, Michelle West and others – in other words, many of the regular contributors to the ongoing Martin H. Greenberg "pulp" [although he's not named as co-editor, the copyright is shared by Tekno Books, which is Greenberg's company].) *October 2002.*

Luciano, Patrick, and Gary Coville. **Smokin' Rockets: The Romance of Technology in American Film, Radio and Television, 1945-1962.** McFarland, ISBN 0-7864-1233-X, vii+260pp, trade paperback, \$35. (Lightly illustrated critical history of American media sf in the postwar period; first edition; sterling-priced import copies should be available in the UK from Shelwing Ltd, 4 Pleydell Gdns., Folkestone, Kent CT20 2DN; this looks to be an interesting, detailed social history, with the emphasis on popular images of technology and the future as reflected in cross-media "skiffy" of the time; there's a filmography, bibliography and full index; recommended.) *October 2002.*

McCarthy, Wil, Martin H. Greenberg and John Helfers, eds. **Once Upon a Galaxy.** DAW, ISBN 0-7564-0091-0, viii+318pp, A-format paperback, \$6.99. (Sf anthology, first edition; it contains 14 all-original stories on transposed fairy-tale themes; sf novelist Wil McCarthy joins the usual Greenberg/DAW "pulp" team for this latest anthology in the series, and... good grief, it seems to have made a difference: there are no women authors with triple names!; instead, the contributors include Gregory Benford, Paul

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Di Filippo, Scott Edelman, Richard Garfinkle, Tanya Huff, Fiona Patton, Bruce Holland Rogers, Stanley Schmidt, Michelle West, Thomas Wylde and others.) *September 2002.*

Macdonald, James D. **The Apocalypse Door.** Tor, ISBN 0-312-86988-6, 224pp, hardcover, cover by Cliff Nielsen, \$22.95. (Fantasy crime novel, first edition; Katherine Kurtz describes it for us helpfully, in a cover endorsement: "Imagine, if you will, *Illuminatus* meets Raymond Chandler..."; hitherto, Macdonald [born 1954] is best known for the several space-operatic "Mageworlds" novels he has written in collaboration with his wife, Debra Doyle.) *15th November 2002.*

McKenna, Juliet E. **The Assassin's Edge: The Fifth Tale of Einarinn.** Orbit 1-84149-124-1, 550pp, A-format paperback, cover by Geoff Taylor, £6.99. (Fantasy novel, first edition; the "explosive final volume" in the series, following *The Thief's Gamble* [1999], *The Swordsman's Oath* [1999], *The Gambler's Fortune* [2000] and *The Warrior's Bond* [2001].) *September 2002.*

MacLeod, Ken. **Dark Light: Engines of Light, Book Two.** Orbit, ISBN 1-84149-109-8, 368pp, A-format paperback, cover by Lee Gibbons, £6.99. (Sf novel, first published in the UK, 2001; sequel to *Cosmonaut Keep* [2000].) *November 2002.*

MacLeod, Ken. **Engine City: Engines of Light, Book Three.** Orbit, ISBN 1-84149-148-9, 271pp, hardcover, cover by Lee Gibbons, £16.99. (Sf novel, first edition; conclusion to in the space-opera trilogy which began with *Cosmonaut Keep* [2000] and *Dark Light* [2001].) *November 2002.*

McMullen, Sean. **Voyage of the Shadowmoon.** Tor, ISBN 0-312-87740-4, 496pp, hardcover, \$27.95. (Fantasy novel, first edition; proof copy received; one of Australia's

best sf writers turns his hand to a ship-voyage fantasy.) *October 2002.*

McNish, Cliff. **The Wizard's Promise.** "Book Three of the Doomspell Trilogy." Orion, ISBN 1-84255-224-4, vi+250pp, hardcover, cover by Geoff Taylor, £8.99. (Juvenile fantasy novel, first edition; follow-up to *The Doomspell* [2000] and *The Scent of Magic* [2001], neither of which we saw; more Harry Potter-bandwagon stuff, by the looks of it, this is an attractive little book, with chapter-heading illustrations by Taylor; the author, McNish, hails from Sunderland but lives in London.) *19th September 2002.*

Meaney, John. **Context: Book Two in the Nulapeiron Sequence.** Bantam Press, ISBN 0-593-04735-4, 441pp, hardcover, cover by Jim Burns, £18.99. (Sf novel, first edition; a third novel – far-out, far-future stuff – by a British writer whose short stories have appeared in *Interzone*; it's a sequel to his second, *Paradox* [2000], which a *Guardian* reviewer described as "pulp SF with class.") *7th November 2002.*

Modesitt, L. E., Jr. **Legacies: The First Book of the Corean Chronicles.** Tor, ISBN 0-765-30561-5, 558pp, hardcover, cover by Daniel Horne, \$27.95. (Fantasy novel, first edition; the beginning of a new series from the super-prolific Modesitt, it's set in a world where "millennia ago, ago a magical disaster caused the fall of a great worldwide civilization"; the map on the book's endpapers makes this imaginary realm look rather like the continental United States of America turned into a huge island.) *29th October 2002.*

Moon, Elizabeth. **Speed of Dark.** Orbit, ISBN 1-84149-141-1, 424pp, A-format paperback, cover by Fred Gambino, £6.99. (Sf novel, first published in the USA, 2002; first UK edition of a stand-alone novel – "a powerful near-future thriller" – by the popular author of the seven-volume "Serrano Legacy" space-opera series.) *November 2002.*

Moorcock, Michael. **Firing the Cathedral.** Introduction by Alan Moore. PS Publishing [Hamilton House, 4 Park Ave., Harrogate, N. Yorks. HG2 9BQ], ISBN 1-902880-45-5, 112pp, hardcover, cover by Richard Powers, £25. (Sf novella, first edition; there is a simultaneous trade paperback edition priced at £8 [not seen]; this is a signed edition, limited to 500 numbered paperback copies and 400 numbered hardcover copies; it's a new "Jerry Cornelius" story, in which Moorcock "responds to the attacks on America of September 2001 and their consequences, to the realities of global warming and global terrorism.") *Late entry: August publication, received in October 2002.*

Morgan, Richard. **Altered Carbon.** Gollancz, ISBN 0-575-07390-X, 534pp, A-format paperback, cover by Chris Moore, £6.99. (Sf novel, first published in the UK, 2002; a debut



book by a new British writer, it's a futuristic crime novel, set in the 25th century and written in post-cyberpunk mode; Peter F. Hamilton and Adam Roberts commend it with phrases like

"hits the floor running and then starts to accelerate" and "superbly written, passages of cool, detached writing that are wonderfully atmospheric, alternating with passages of ultraviolence brutal enough to be genuinely shocking"; reviewed by Matt Hills in *Interzone* 179.) 19th September 2002.

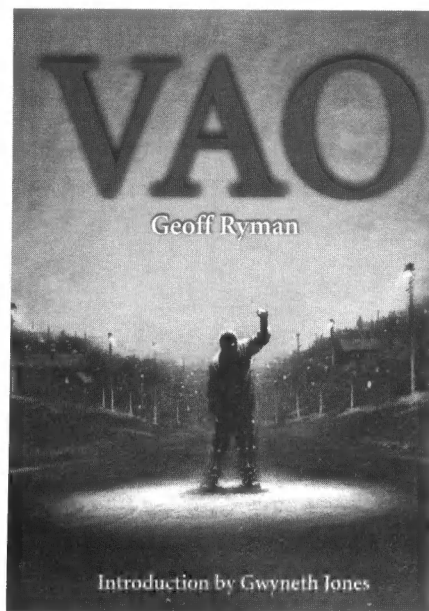
Norton, Andre, and Sasha Miller. **A Crown Disowned: Volume Three of the Cycle of Oak, Yew, Ash, and Rowan.** Tor, ISBN 0-312-87338-7, 416pp, hardcover, cover by Royo, \$25.95. (Fantasy novel, first edition; a follow-up to *To the King a Daughter* [2000] and *Knight or Knave* [2001]; although billed as a collaboration, it's probably a sharecrop [i.e. largely written by the junior partner, Sasha Miller] – Andre Norton, whose first novel appeared in 1934, is getting very elderly.) 9th October 2002.

Reynolds, Alastair. **Turquoise Days.** Golden Gryphon Press [3002 Perkins Rd., Urbana, IL 61802, USA], no ISBN, 79pp, trade paperback, cover by Bob Eggleton, \$15.95. (Sf novella, first edition; it's a limited edition of 500 signed and numbered copies; it seems that Golden Gryphon, who up to now have published only well-made hardcover books, are jumping on PS Publishing's bandwagon and starting a line of novellas – and, indeed, pinching one of PS's authors!; to order, see publishers' website: www.goldengryphon.com.) September 2002.

Robson, Justina. **Mappa Mundi.** Pan, ISBN 0-330-37567-9, 628pp, A-format paperback, cover by Steve Stone, £6.99. (Sf novel, first published in the UK, 2001; a second novel by this new British writer who hails from Leeds, it concerns medical nanotechnology and brain manipulation, and it was shortlisted for this year's Arthur C. Clarke Award; trendy fellow-writer Zadie Smith is quoted on the cover, commending Robson as "a novelist of real vision.") 12th October 2002.

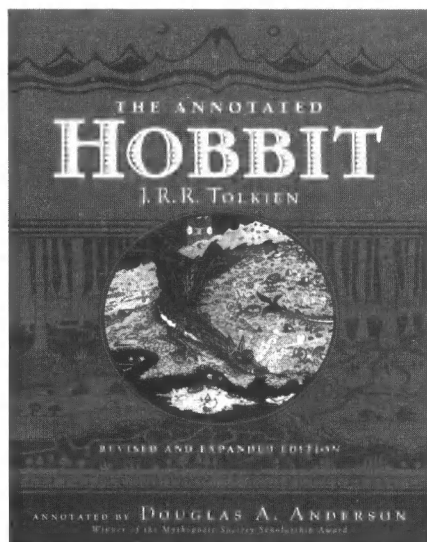
Russell, Sean. **The Isle of Battle: Book Two of The Swans' War.** Orbit, ISBN 1-84149-086-5, xii+464pp, hardcover, cover by David Wyatt, £12.99. (Fantasy novel, first published in the USA, 2002; a Big Commercial Fantasy by one of two Canadian writers called "Sean" who emerged around the same time and have both received praise: Sean Russell should not be confused with his compatriot Sean Stewart [who still awaits UK publication, so far as we know].) September 2002.

Rydill, Jessica. **The Glass Mountain.** Orbit, ISBN 1-84149-112-8, 469pp, A-format paperback, £6.99. (Fantasy novel, first edition; sequel to *Children of the Shaman* [2001], a second book by a new British writer who "lives in the West Country with her collection of slightly unnerving dolls.") October 2002.



Ryman, Geoff. **V.A.O.** Introduction by Gwyneth Jones. PS Publishing [Hamilton House, 4 Park Ave., Harrogate, N. Yorks. HG2 9BQ], ISBN 1-902880-48-X, 67pp, small-press trade paperback, cover by Edward Miller, £8. (Sf novella, first edition; there is a simultaneous hardcover edition priced at £25 [not seen]; it's a signed edition, limited to 500 numbered paperback copies and 300 numbered hardcover copies; this one came as a pleasant surprise: we didn't notice it advertised as a forthcoming item in the rear of previous PS Publishing titles.) September 2002.

Saberhagen, Fred. **A Coldness in the Blood.** Tor, ISBN 0-765-30045-1, 383pp, hardcover, cover by Vince Natale, \$25.95. (Horror/fantasy novel, first edition; it's a sequel-by-another-hand, of sorts, inspired by Bram Stoker – Saberhagen's first new "Dracula" novel in some years, follow-up to *A Sharpness on the Neck* [1996?], which we don't recall seeing; the series began in the 1970s.) 9th October 2002.



Scott, Randall W. **European Comics in English Translation: A Descriptive Sourcebook.** McFarland, ISBN 0-7864-1205-4, 395pp, trade paperback, \$75. (Unillustrated guide to European comic books and comic strips, many of them sf or fantasy; first edition; sterling-priced import copies should be available in the UK from Shelving Ltd, 4 Pleydell Gdns., Folkestone, Kent CT20 2DN; with its well-crammed, double-columned pages, this looks to be a mine of information for those interested in *bandes dessinées*; as well as serving as a who's who of creators and translators in this popular medium, it also gives useful plot descriptions; there's a full index; recommended to all those who have an obsession with the subject.) November 2002.

Smith, Dale. **Heritage.** "Doctor Who." BBC, 0-563-53864-3, 282pp, A-format paperback, £5.99. (Sf TV-series spinoff novel, first edition; featuring the Seventh Doctor and Ace.) 7th October 2002.

Stableford, Brian. **The Omega Expedition.** Tor, ISBN 0-765-30169-5, 544pp, hardcover, \$27.95. (Sf novel, first edition; proof copy received; sixth and last in the loose series of very imaginative biotech novels Stableford has been writing for Tor Books, following *Inherit the Earth* [1998], *Architects of Emortality* [1999], *The Fountains of Youth* [2000 – described by the *New York Times* as "cerebral science fiction of a high order"], *The Cassandra Complex* [2001] and *Dark Ararat* [2002]; this one is partly based on a short story of Brian's we published in *Interzone* many years ago – "And He Not Busy Being Born..." [1986].) December 2002.

Stewart, Ian, and Jack Cohen. **Wheeler's.** "A novel of First Contact – and Earth's possible destruction." Earthlight, 0-7434-2902-8, 498pp, A-format paperback, cover by Bob Eggleton, £7.99. (Sf novel, first published in the USA, 2000; technically, this should be classed as a debut novel, but of course the authors are well-known British scientists who have already written many non-fiction books, both separately and together; it's based, in part, on the same ideas as a Stewart-and-Cohen short story we published in *Interzone* in October 1998 – "Code of the Skydiver" [issue 136].) 4th November 2002.

Tarr, Judith. **Devil's Bargain.** Roc, ISBN 0-451-45896-6, 387pp, trade paperback, cover by Ray Lundgren, \$16. (Alternate-history fantasy novel, first edition; it concerns Richard the Lionheart, "King of the English" [although he was actually a Frenchman, Count of Anjou], and his famous crusade to the Holy Land in the 1190s, which in reality ended badly but here meets with success [well, it's one way to write a novel nowadays about Europeans at war with Islam]; the dedication reads: "For Harry Turtledove. It's all your fault"; compare and contrast Turtledove's own new novel, *Ruled Britannia*, below.) October 2002.

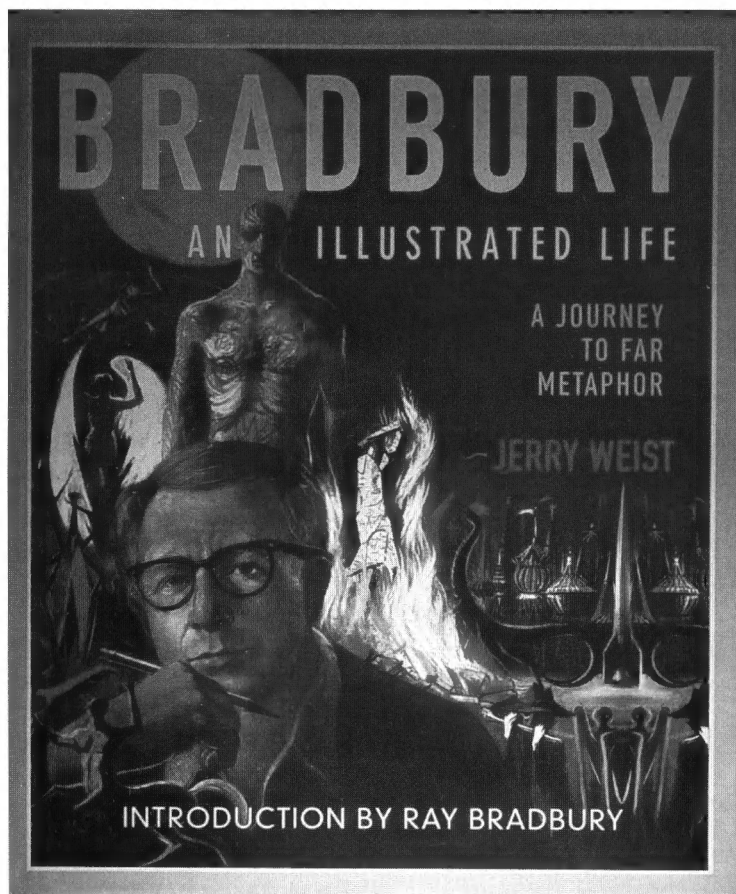
Tarr, Judith. **Tides of Darkness**. Tor, ISBN 0-312-87615-7, 412pp, hardcover, cover by Charles Keegan, \$25.95. (Fantasy novel, first edition; coming after a five-year gap in the series, it's described as "a stunning new fantasy adventure in the acclaimed Avaryan Chronicles"; it also happens to be the second new novel by this author released in the same month: she may not be quite as prolific as her co-scholar and friend Harry T, but she's getting there.) 22nd October 2002.

Tolkien, J. R. R. **The Annotated Hobbit. Revised and Expanded Edition**. Annotated by Douglas A. Anderson. Illustrated by the author. Houghton Mifflin, ISBN 0-618-13470-0, xii+399pp, hardcover, cover by Tolkien, \$28. (Juvenile fantasy novel, first published in 1937; this is a new version of Douglas Anderson's much-praised annotated edition, originally published in 1988 and winner of the Mythopoeic Society Scholarship Award; according to the preface, "every section of this new edition... has been revised, updated, and rewritten"; it's a remarkable labour of love on Anderson's part, and the result is an essential book for serious Tolkien enthusiasts.) September 2002.

Tolkien, J. R. R. **The Lord of the Rings**. HarperCollins, ISBN 0-00-714914-X, xix+535+439+554pp, three A-format paperback volumes in a boxed set, £22. (Fantasy novel, first published in the UK in three volumes, *The Fellowship of the Ring*, *The Two Towers* and *The Return of the King*, 1954-55; this edition has cover art taken from the films directed by Peter Jackson; the individual books are priced at £6.99 each, so if you prefer to buy the set you'll be paying an extra £1.03 for a rather flimsy cardboard box; as we commented before, it seems there is no end in sight to the repackagings of this ever-popular work.) 7th October 2002.

Turtledove, Harry. **Ruled Britannia**. New American Library, ISBN 0-451-20717-3, 458pp, hardcover, cover by Steve Stone, \$24.95. (Alternate-history sf novel, first edition; yet another American novel which dares to feature William Shakespeare as its leading character, this one opens in the year 1597, in a timeline where the Spanish Armada of a decade earlier has succeeded in conquering England; the Spanish playwright Lope de Vega is also among the cast [apparently, in our world, he really did sail in the Armada, and survived]; obviously this is not Turtledove's customary fare, and it makes more than usual demands on his verbal

resources [in a three-page "Historical Note," he confesses to cribbing most of his pseudo-Shakespearean lines from John Fletcher and the lesser-known works of sundry other playwrights of the day], but he seems to have made a fair stab at it; unlike Turtledove's "parochial" American Civil War novels, of which it feels as though he has written dozens, this is a book which should be of particular interest to readers on this side of the Atlantic.) November 2002.



Weist, Jerry. **Bradbury: An Illustrated Life. A Journey to Far Metaphor**. Foreword by Donn Albright. Introduction by Ray Bradbury. Morrow, ISBN 0-06-001182-3, xxvi+195pp, large-format hardcover, cover by Joseph Mugnaini, \$34.95. (Copiously illustrated, anecdotal "biography" of a leading sf/fantasy writer, first edition; as the blurb says, this attractive book "features magazine illustrations, movie stills and posters, comic book art, letters, scripts, book jackets, and paintings – all expertly selected and insightfully explained – that trace an incomparable artist's journey through the 20th century and into the 21st"; there's some fascinating visual stuff here, and it's good to see Bradbury so honoured.) 9th October 2002.

Williams, Walter Jon. **The Praxis**. "Book One of Dread Empire's Fall." Earthlight, ISBN 0-7434-6110-X, 418pp, C-format paperback, £10.99. (Sf novel, first published in the USA [?], 2002; there is a simultaneous hardcover edition [not seen]

priced at £17.99; Williams's return to sf after some years away, it seems to be very large-scale space opera.) 7th October 2002.

Wilson, Robert Charles. **A Hidden Place**. Tor/Orb, ISBN 0-765-30261-6, 220pp, trade paperback, cover by Gregory Manchess, \$12.95. (Sf novel, first published in the USA, 1986; this pleasant piece of Americana – slightly Sturgeonesque, slightly Simakian – was Wilson's debut novel; his has been a quiet career, perhaps held back by the blandness of his name [and the chance that some people may have confused him with the totally dissimilar Robert Anton Wilson – or, for that matter, with sf anthologist Robin Scott Wilson], but he's worth reading and this is a welcome reprint.) 30th September 2002.

Wood, Patrick. **Viaduct Child**. Scholastic Press, ISBN 0-439-98196-4, 255pp, hardcover, cover by Pascal Milelli, £12.99. (Juvenile fantasy novel, first edition; a debut book by a new British writer [born in Leeds, 1968]; this is the latest in Scholastic's ambitious line of older kids' "literary fiction" [their term], following such items as Chris Wooding's *The Haunting of Alaiabel Cray* [2001] and Philip Reeve's *Mortal Engines* [2001] – amounting to a distinctive British "brand" which seems to have been inspired by this publisher's success with Philip Pullman's "His Dark Materials" trilogy.) 15th November 2002.

Zettel, Sarah. **The Usurper's Crown: Book Two of the Isavaltia Trilogy**. Voyager, ISBN 0-00-711403-6, 531pp, C-format paperback, cover by Steve Stone, £11.99. (Fantasy novel, first edition [?]; there may be a simultaneous hardcover edition [not seen]; follow-up to *A Sorcerer's Treason* [2002] in a Big Commercial Fantasy series by an American author [born 1966] who was previously best known for her hard sf [stories in *Analog*, etc.]) 4th November 2002.

Zindell, David. **The Lightstone: Book One of the Ea Cycle. Part Two: The Silver Sword**. Voyager, ISBN 0-00-713996-9, 454pp, A-format paperback, cover by Geoff Taylor, £6.99. (Fantasy novel, first published in the UK, 2001; the author's first foray into Big Commercial Fantasy – and very big it is too – this novel was originally published as one huge volume, but HarperCollins have split it in two for the mass-market paperback reprint; *Part One: The Ninth Kingdom* appeared in September; the full thing was reviewed by Nick Gevers in *Interzone* 171.) 7th October 2002.



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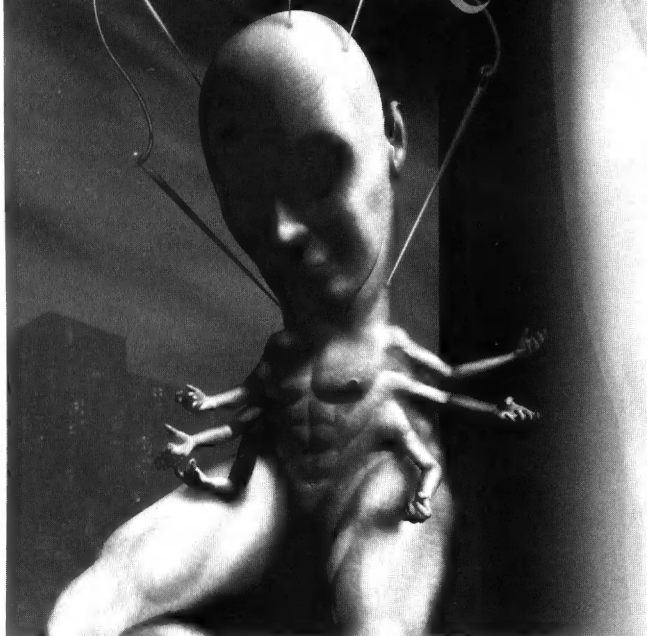
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